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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Lena the Scream-Cleaner and other stories

BY

Jason Kapalka

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 1994

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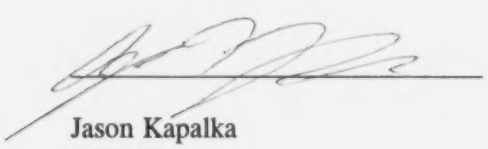

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Lena the Scream-Cleaner and other stories* submitted by Jason Kapalka in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Lena the Scream-Cleaner

Lena worked in the Scream Processing Department for many years before Sam found her. Day in, day out, she scrubbed, rinsed, and wrung dry the assorted shrieks, howls, moans, wails, and sighs that came tumbling down the long chute to her work station. She carefully squeezed the sentiment from each shriek, washed and dried it. The waste emotion, oily-rainbow colored, was carried out of the room in great buckets, to be destroyed or buried deep underground; the screams themselves were sent to another room where they were starched, folded, and eventually recirculated into general use. Then another batch came howling down the chute and Lena went back to work.

It had been so long that she scarcely remembered how she had come to work for Scream Processing. She had her small blue apartment, and a cat called Whiskey. She liked quiet, and quiet music, and sometimes watched movies on TV. She liked to cook pasta dishes and to make pencil sketches, though she ate alone and never showed her drawings to anyone, and she sometimes read books and sometimes cried quietly for no discernible reason, the translucent sobs fluttering away through her window to wing their way back to Scream Processing, where she would encounter them the next day, wondering uneasily at the eerie, shivery colour of their emotion.

She shopped only at the little all-night store where the other Scream Processing employees shopped, and she went out only to Scream Processing functions, which were quiet, almost sad affairs.

There would be her fellow scream-cleaners, ragged grey men and women old beyond their years. There were the sly-looking Disposal urchins, and the quiet, shadowy men from Acoustics upstairs, who dissected and catalogued scream-components in a quiet shadowy laboratory. There was Supervisor Sheen, of course, a cheerful old man with a shock of yellowish hair. And sometimes she would see visiting executives from the Human Grief Concern, Scream Processing's parent company, and once or twice she'd even caught sight of a shriek-catcher, one of the elite operatives who combed the outside world for lost and misplaced screams.

She'd never really inquired into the deeper workings of Scream Processing. The screams made their way back to the Department, were processed, and were sent out again into the world: that was all she needed to know. But once, when she was

still new to the job, she'd spoken to Supervisor Sheen at one of the Department functions, and he had told her something of Scream Processing's operations.

"The emotion that charges our screams is cheap, of course. Not valueless," he said, wagging a finger, "but cheap: there will always be more. But our screams, now these, Lena, these... are nonreproducible."

Sheen's smile, which was never noticeable till it faded, faded. Lena felt uneasy. "There are only so many screams, Lena," he went on, "and despite our best research they remain finite in number, though every year a few more wear out or are lost forever. One day the last groan, the last shriek, the last sigh will vanish from the world--and then--"

"What?"

"Oh... nothing," Sheen said, regaining his smile.

But when Lena thought about his answer later, she realized he could have meant two different things.

Now when she attended a Scream Processing party, she scarcely spoke to anybody, let alone the Supervisor. From time to time a man, perhaps an Acoustics researcher or a fellow cleaner, would nervously ask her if she'd like to go see a film or a play. Irrational panic would clog her throat; eventually she would gasp out an excuse of one sort or another, and the man would seem as relieved as she was when he could drop the subject. She didn't think any of the Department employees ever went out--ever, in fact, did *anything*, and as she gradually became convinced of this, she realized that a silent pall had fallen over her own life.

Later she supposed she had known that something was wrong even when the man in the yellow sports jacket first approached her on the street outside the Department. But at the time she was able to convince herself otherwise... She'd just come off a terrible shift, having spilled a panful of Class C Startled Squeaks which had fluttered and flurried away into dark corners and nooks, with the result that the workroom had to be shut down for half an hour while they were coaxed out.

"Lena?" the man in the yellow jacket said. He had a long troutlike face. "Can you come with me, please? There are some important details we need to discuss."

He gestured towards a white car parked by the curb, and she found herself getting in. She remembered thinking this must have been about her accident in the workroom that day, she was being reprimanded or fired, but even then, really, she must have known it was all wrong.

He said his name was Lomax as they drove out of the city, past buildings and neighbourhoods that she hadn't seen for--how many years had it been? Had she ever seen these places before? He drove out into the country and took a narrow dirt road.

He stopped the car at a small acreage. There was a brown and white house. He got out of the car and led her inside without saying anything. He took her down a long dark hall that ended in a door. Light came out from underneath it.

Lomax showed her inside. "This is Sam," he said. "He wants to talk to you."

The man in the wooden chair was very sick.

His head lolled atop a thin neck that seemed too feeble to support it. His eyes were closed and wrinkles creased the sockets. Without opening his eyes, he clutched

at the armrests and leaned forward as the door opened. There was something brittle about him: a radiation of hurt.

The man in the yellow sports jacket--Lomax--waited for Lena to enter, then closed the door behind her. She looked at the man in the chair. "You don't work for the Department," she said at last.

Sam lifted his head to her. He still hadn't opened his eyes, and she wondered if he was blind. His mouth opened slowly, moistly, and he spoke.

"No, I don't," he said slowly, almost whispering, "I suppose you would call me a researcher, a scientist of sorts. My project was human suffering. I travelled the world, the dark places, and the bright... Africa, Kampuchea, China...the alleys and ghettoes of Europe and America... the corpse fields... the soundproofed rooms... I collected fear and anger and hurt. I hoarded murder-lust and heartbreak; scooped up quantities of smaller pains, paper-cuts, money-worries, wasp-bites. I thought if I saw enough... took enough on... I could eliminate suffering from the world. I'm not mad. There was reason. There was *precedent*... but never mind."

His eyelids trembled. "I'm something of an idealist, you see, Lena."

This all seemed insane to her--why else was she pressed back against the door? "It didn't work," she said.

"No, it didn't. But the principle was sound. It was me. It was me. My limits. It can still work. I--"

His hands clenched around the arms of the chair, and suddenly he threw his head back in what Lena first assumed was a grotesque yawn, until she saw the way

the skin at the corners of his mouth was stretched so tight it was bleeding, his frame yanked taut across the chair. He was screaming. He was screaming, but there was no sound, none at all.

His body trembled in the grip of it for ten, now twenty seconds. Finally he slumped into the chair, his head sagging over his chest.

"What--" Lena began. Then Sam swung his head up.

He opened his eyes. They were blue and horrible. What was it? A coldness, a hard slickness, something skating over miles of black mirror... She turned away.

She could hear him breathing. He spoke again. "So sorry, Lena. It comes and goes. But now you see."

She glanced back: his eyes were closed. "...Yes."

"After the experiment," Sam rasped, "I screamed for seven days. My vocal cords were torn to shreds, but still I kept on. After a week I ran out of screams. I used them all up but I still need more. Do you understand now what I want from you?"

She thought she did.

She knew she did.

But--

"Why me?"

"Do you want me to lie?" Sam said wearily. "You were the only person we could find. The Department, as you call it, is not easy to locate... I can't threaten you."

"I could lose my job."

"Yes. I could offer you money, but that would be pointless. What is it that you want, Lena? I can offer you nothing but this choice."

She closed her eyes. Nothing but the risk of wrecking her own life for the sake of a man who cared nothing for her, who needed her only as a tool. And what did he know about her? She already understood *him* well enough to know he was too proud to offer even his gratitude. He offered nothing, nothing but the one thing she'd given up, so long ago when she'd thought she would never need it again.

"You're very clever," she said finally.

It was easier than she'd thought it would be.

She waited until noon when the other cleaners went on their lunch break. She told them she'd be along as soon as she finished with her last item. It was an F-5b Plangent Outcry, large and slippery: as the last cleaner filed out of the workroom, she slid it into a plastic bag, folded it up as well as she could, muffled it with a thick cloth, and stuffed it into her lunchbag. When she went upstairs to the coffee room, she made a side trip to the coat room and placed it inside her purse.

And that was all. That was it.

And later: Sam's assistant Lomax standing beside the white car in his yellow sports jacket.

The country road, the acreage, the house: and then Lena was in the room at the end of the hall again, with the stolen scream, wrapped and silenced, in her hand like a gift. She supposed it was.

She began to pluck at the wrapping, glanced doubtfully at Lomax, standing off by the side. "Should I--" He nodded.

Sam was shaking as he waited for her. She couldn't read the emotion on his stiff white face. She unfolded the scream, dropped the wrapping to the floor, and stepped towards him. Carefully she slipped the scream into his mouth.

There was a moment of perfect silence then, as he opened his mad eyes and gazed up at her. For a second Lena almost thought he smiled.

And then the scream came roaring out of him, too immense for his frail body to contain. Lomax fell aside in shock. Lena, who had more experience with this sort of thing, was nonetheless appalled: emotion trembled in the air, vibrating itself away through the walls and ceiling, for half a minute after the scream fled.

Sam's body was twisted in his chair, and Lena leaned over him to see if he was still alive.

He lifted his head. There was no mistake this time: his eyes, for that one moment, were serene and empty of horror. Despite herself Lena reached to put one of her hands on his.

He stiffened and his eyes closed. Lomax stepped closer to grasp his shoulder. "Sam?"

Sam's mouth snapped open in silence and he opened his eyes again and they were the same as before, or worse--vertigo sliding down a starless sky. He would scream on through the night, but Lena's startled cry at that moment would be the only sound.

She embezzled screams for another three months before they caught her. It seemed like the terrors bottled inside Sam had no end. Each night when Lomax drove her out to the house, she thought: perhaps *this* time. Perhaps this will vent the last of his bottled horrors.

But...

It never did.

And Lena never found out how they caught her. Ripples spread through Scream Processing's accounts; somewhere they were noted, and action was taken. One afternoon as Lena prepared to leave with a bag of whimpers hidden in her purse, two slight, well-dressed men casually stepped in front of her. They didn't even bother to search her purse. They took her directly to Supervisor Sheen's office.

Sheen was behind his desk. He wasn't smiling. Lena sat down, sighing, as the two men left.

"So what happens now?" she asked Sheen.

Sheen shook his head sadly. "It's not my decision, Lena. Will you tell me why you did it?"

"Don't you know?"

"You mean Samuel Lefoe? Yes, I know about him. His condition. Why did you help him? What does he mean to you that you would risk all this?"

"He needed help."

"A lot of people need help. Did you think he loved you, Lena?

She laughed.

"Lena--"

"Does it matter, Mr. Sheen? Does it really matter?"

He slammed his palms down on the desk. "It wouldn't have worked, you know, Lena. It wouldn't have worked if they'd let you keep stealing for another three months, or three years."

She knew he was right.

"So what now?" she asked at last.

"You're being promoted. I'm sorry, Lena."

She could only stare.

Lena was promoted to shriek-catcher.

She never saw her apartment again. She never cooked pasta or watched TV or made pencil sketches or rubbed the stomach of her cat Whiskey again. She neither needed nor was allowed these things any more. When she saw Sheen or one of her former co-workers they looked at her with a nervous awe, but she never thought to exploit or alleviate these reactions. She felt nothing for her fellow workers now.

She roamed the city day and night by modes of travel and navigation she could not explain. Here, three feet under the soil of a back-yard garden, was an unwanted baby, which had been not quite dead when the parents buried it. She gently extracted the last anguished cry from between the cool lips, stored it in a pressurized vessel.

There, someone down a lost alleyway died in a not quite unimaginable fashion: she found the last howl, too terrified even to wing its way back to the safety of Scream Processing, cowering under a garbage bin, and it too went into one of her containers.

The punishment they'd given her was perfect in its way. There was only one place in the world she would never be called to visit, and would never be able to go: a small quiet room in a house on an acreage where no scream, no outcry, no whimper or moan would ever break the silence.

It was too bad. She and Sam had a lot in common. She understood what the look in his eyes meant now.

And here, in the back of a filthy lean-to on the edge of the slums, was a soiled and tattered sob, which fell to pieces as she tried to lift it, and there was one less in the world.

As the night came on there slowly arose a cacophony of yammers, whines, and screeches all about her, ten thousand voices of the city calling out in anger and pain and fear, the screams twisting through the air as they fled homewards, one here and one there falling back to become stranded or trapped.

She stopped for a moment and thought about the day Supervisor Sheen had long ago described to her, the day when the last scream would wear out and disappear. She knew that on that day the last laugh, the last gleeful shout, and the last word spoken by human lips would vanish, also, into the sudden and everlasting calm.

It would be a good day. It was the only day worth waiting for. Slowly she moved on.

The End of Things

Even before he was born, Peter's parents were anxious to see that he had no illusions about the grim world he was entering. "The end of things is coming!" his father barked into a specially-designed megaphone positioned next to his mother's stomach. "There'll be nothing but cold, and dark, and silence, and across the face of the earth no movement, none at all... except maybe for a few grubs, and small snuffling creatures nosing through the rubble."

Peter's father projected charts indicating the likelihood of nuclear Armageddon onto his mother's belly, reversed so that they would be legible to the child inside her womb. And as she rocked slowly back and forth in her easy chair, his mother recited to the growing bulge in her midriff rates of species extinction, global warming, and

disease spread, concluding with the gentle cooing lullaby which Peter, for the rest of his life, would always associate with her: "Doom, doom," she sang, "doom."

"It's a miracle you lived this long," his father said to the squalling pink-skinned infant in the delivery room. "But you know, the hole in the ozone is spreading. And there's that trouble in the Middle East." His exhausted mother on the delivery table still had the energy to croak out: "Doom."

Peter's parents stocked his crib at home with plastic skeletons, the better to familiarize him with death. When he swallowed a little skull, turning red and purple before it was ejected, they thought they heard an acknowledgment of mortality in his pathetic bawling. "The end is near," his mother sang, tickling him under the chin, while his father tried to explain the Malthusian food-vs.-population model with flash cards. "Famine, plague, death," his father said. "Doom, doom," cooed his mother.

When Peter was five his father bought him a glossy book with photographs of radiation victims, while his mother gave him the Easy Reader picture-book adaptation of Sartre's *Nausea*. Peter flipped through them both with no discernible soberness, then ate the twenty-page Hiroshima pictorial.

"Doom," his mother chided him, before whispering worriedly to his father: "I don't think Peter appreciates the gravity of the situation yet."

"You're right," his father sighed. "But remember, these are just toys. What he needs is some personal experience with death."

They started small, with a gerbil in a cage. When they judged that Peter had become attached to it-- he called it Henry, letting it run up his sleeve and down his

shirt-- they poisoned it and left Peter to make this mortal discovery on his own. When they entered the room a little while later, they weren't quite sure what to make of the scene before them: Peter had stuffed Henry's limp form into the crow's nest of his tinkertoy schooner, which he was attacking with a pirate ship.

And by the time Peter had grown to a talkative, pudgy boy of seven-- several pets later-- they were seriously worried about the efficiency of their educational technique.

"I don't think he really grasps the concept of total obliteration," his father said. "He thinks it means there'll be no more gerbils."

"Doom," his mother sighed.

They kept trying, but became fearful that the boy had a learning disability of some sort. And so, when one day Peter waddled up to him and asked, "Dad, does the end of the world mean you'll be dead?", his father was secretly overjoyed.

"Why, certainly, Peter," he replied.

"And Mom?"

"Sure thing."

"And me?"

"Deader than a doorknob."

"And all the gerbils?"

"Every one of them." His father looked down at the boy with tenderness. "Son, are you asking me all this because of Henry the Sixth?"

Peter, who hadn't even noticed yet that his latest gerbil was dead, shook his head. "Nah, one of the girls in school got run over today."

"Why, that's awful," his father smiled.

"Yeah, but Dad, when is the end of the world *coming?*"

"I don't know. Could be any second now."

"Can you do anything about it?" Peter said slowly.

"Why, hell, no, son."

Peter hesitated. He had a look of great concentration on his young face. "It's dumb, then," he said at last. He threw up his hands and stomped away from his father's frozen smile.

By the time Peter was nine his parents agreed that somewhere along the way he had taken a wrong turn. Though he readily agreed with their predictions of food riots, nuclear winters, and environmental catastrophes, somehow his heart wasn't in it, he seemed only to be mouthing the responses they wanted to hear. It came as a great relief to them when, one June evening, the conflicts that had been roiling interminably in various corners of the globe finally reached a satisfactory conclusion, and the eastern sky lit up with a series of white flashes.

"Multiple impact re-entry vehicles," his father said happily as he stood with Peter and his mother on the porch. "See? Looks like payloads in the ten-kiloton range. Didn't I say this was going to happen?"

"We both did, dear."

"Doom?" Peter asked, shouting to be heard over the sudden thunder of the blast wave from the distant strikes.

"Doom," his mother confirmed, fondly tousling his hair.

Peter's parents moved with serenity through the hectic days that followed, watching from the porch as station wagons loaded to the windows with food honked and squealed in their urgent need to escape.

"Can we go too?" Peter asked.

"Don't be silly, Peter," his father said. "It won't do any good. Fallout, remember?"

"Aw, this is boring. There's nothing to do."

"Look, Peter," his mother said to cheer him, pulling a tuft of hair from her head.

"Wow," Peter gasped appreciatively, but he grew restive again when he tried yanking his own hair out and it remained in place. Neither his mother nor his father could understand how it was that Peter seemed immune to the effects of the radiation, unless it was just the resilience of youth, but still, they assumed he would come to terms with it shortly.

Peter turned ten in July. For the first while, he was sure that the end of the world was the most boring thing he'd ever experienced. He couldn't go to school to see his friends, his seventh gerbil had died, and all his parents ever did was sit around the house throwing up and pulling out their hair. But one day, while he was breaking the windows of parked cars in the empty neighbourhood, he ran into a group of other

kids his own age, who said they were going to play in the abandoned supermarket, which had lots of food and stuff to bust-- and things started to look up.

"I'm not sure that Peter has grasped the magnitude of all this," his mother said to his father when they were alone. She flushed the toilet clear of bloody vomit and wiped her mouth. "He's off playing with his friends somewhere. They've got him thinking the end of the world is just a chance to weave all our hair into bracelets and necklaces."

Peter's father coughed and scratched his sores. "I know," he gasped. "I can't understand it."

Peter's parents spent most of their time now in their easy chairs, which had been moved out to the front porch for a better view. Convulsing in illness, they commiserated on their failure to instill in their son the proper respect for Armageddon. They sat together on the porch, staring out at the empty streets, and from time to time one would heave a dismal sigh.

One morning, after Peter had left for the supermarket, there was a sound overhead, and Peter's parents looked up in time to see a streak of silver plummeting toward the horizon.

"Well, I'll be darned," his father said.

"Doom," his mother agreed happily. "Though heaven only knows what it is they're bombing now."

The flash this time was so bright that for three days afterwards every fissure on the moon's surface was clearly visible in the daytime; the blast, so loud that it

rolled past Peter's neighbourhood, around the world, and back again with diminished volume five times over the next week. Peter, who along with his friends had been playing with rats in one of the supermarket freezers, came out in time to see winged brown shapes pattering down onto the smouldering concrete outside-- birds baked in mid-air. A moment later Peter ducked as the world-shaking rumble sent a hurricane of glass ripping through the store.

"Cool," he said.

When he got back home he found his parents scorched into crispy black shapes, still sitting on the smoking remains of their easy chairs. He pondered them in silence for a moment, until he saw that the two charred heads had rotated about to fix on him.

"Peter!" came a breathy voice from the leftmost black shape. "What are you doing walking around? It's the end of the world."

"Aw, Dad, you said that the last time. It's just some more bombs. All the other kids are still alive."

"Doom," whispered the other corpse, sadly shaking its head back and forth with a crunchy sound. "Doom, doom."

The days and weeks and months passed. By the time Peter was eleven, the burnt bodies of his parents had been worn down by the winds until the charcoal-black substance flaked and blew away like crepe paper, leaving only a jumble of bones heaped in the two easy chairs. Peter avoided them when he could but was obliged to

stop and talk to them briefly in the mornings, when he left the house to go play with his friends.

"Brrr!" his father's skull said in a raspy whisper. "It's getting awfully cold for this time of year."

"Doom," his mother's skull replied. "It's that nuclear winter thing. Peter, have you started to freeze to death yet?"

"Not yet, Ma."

His father's skull sighed, and the bones in the chair rustled and clacked against each other. "Boy, in my time if there was an all-out nuclear war you'd just lie down and die," he said. "None of this gallivanting around eating rats."

"The rats are all dead, Dad. We eat roaches now."

When Peter had loped off into the rubble to chase bugs with his friends, his father ground his teeth together in ire. "Do you think we could have been wrong about all this?"

"I don't know, dear. I think Peter's just being stubborn."

The radiation that evening was particularly fierce, and Peter came home through a dusk of flickering emerald-green light.

"It's a crying shame," his father's skull said, "you running around all night in this sort of weather. I wouldn't be surprised if you started mutating."

Peter felt a rush of shame. "And what if I did, Dad?"

"Peter!" his mother's skull whistled. "*Are* you mutating?"

"Aw, geez, Mom... it's just a hand, it's not like some big deal or anything--"

"A hand? What's this? You show me what you're talking about this instant!"

Reluctantly Peter pulled his shirt up to show his parents the rudimentary hand that was beginning to grow out of his left side.

"Peter," his mother's skull said slowly, "if this is something you want to talk to us about--"

"I think it's disgusting," his father interrupted. "A boy his age--"

"Dear, try to understand what he's going through--"

Peter squirmed in mortification. "It's nothing! Can't you both just leave me alone!" he shouted as he ran inside.

By the time Peter turned thirteen, all the topsoil had eroded, and tumultuous duststorms began to blow through his neighbourhood. Though the rest of their bones were swept away by the winds, his parents grimly clamped their jaws onto the chair frames, and so the two skulls remained in place to berate Peter each morning.

"Just look at you!" his father barked. "Ragged hair, no clothes, dirt all over--and that extra arm, and those feelers growing out of your head! For heaven's sake, you look like some kind of feral child!"

"He is a feral child, dear."

"Honey, please..."

"Geez, Dad, gimme a break! Everyone looks like this these days."

"And look how thin you are! That's what comes of eating roaches."

"The roaches are all dead, Pa. We eat cement now."

"You eat what?"

"Cement."

"You eat *cement?*"

"And rubber and cardboard, when we can find it. Look, I gotta go."

"No you don't, young man! You're grounded!" his father said in a scraping voice. "No son of mine is going around eating rubble!"

Peter pulled himself up indignantly. "I don't have to take orders from you."

"Oh you don't, do you?"

"No," he said, scratching himself with his third arm. "I'm going to live with Skaz and Ox. They've got a cool place in the sewer."

After Peter had galloped away on all fives into the glowing ruins, his parents conferred.

"You know what it is?" his father said. "We went too easy on that boy."

"I don't know, dear. Maybe we were wrong. Maybe this isn't the end."

The other skull was silent for a while. "I guess maybe," it grumbled at last, "just maybe, this isn't the end yet. But you wait! It'll come along soon enough. Then that boy'll be sorry he didn't listen."

Peter did not come home that night, or the next. His parents hoped that he had come to his senses and succumbed to death somewhere in the ruined city, but suspected otherwise. They maintained their vigil on the porch.

Peter himself had no intentions of going home again. All his parents wanted was for him to lie down and die, boringly, like them, while out in the ruins there was so much to do: wrestling matches to be held in the empty hotel rooms, pictures to be

scrawled on the walls of the broken-down courthouse, strange fluorescent fluids to be found bubbling up out of the earth.

The two skulls became pitted and porous from the acidic raindrops that splashed down on them, but still they waited for Peter to come home.

Finally one day they heard the shriek of missiles passing overhead again.

"Thank God!" his father cried.

"It didn't do much last time."

"They'll get it right now, you just watch."

"Oh, Robert."

There was a light.

Peter put down the chunk of cement he was chewing and squinted upwards.

The blast, when it came, was phenomenal: a series of chain-reacting explosions so forceful the earth shifted in its orbit and began spiralling away from the sun. The flash and thunder went on for days. On the tenth day, the blasts finally stopped, though their reverberating noise would echo around the planet for years to come. On the eleventh day it became obvious that the foundations of heaven had been blown out, for the celestial palace came plunging to earth in a smash of crystal just a few hundred yards from the supermarket. God, a slim brown androgynous creature,

lay trapped under Its throne in the wreckage. It died shortly thereafter, either from the thick syrupy radiation, or from shock and embarassment.

Peter's parents' skulls were shivered into fragments by the blast, and the fragments were devoured by electrically glowing grubs that had come worming up from the center of the earth. A neon-red worm ate the scorched shards of his father's skull; another grub, pulsating purple, swallowed the more delicate remains of his mother.

Time passed. As the earth flew further from its orbit, the light of the sun waned, until everything was dark and cold. In the flattened, carbonized remains of Peter's house, the phosphorescent grubs squirmed randomly about. By the time Peter would have been fifteen, most of the glowing creatures had moved off, burrowing back into the earth, but two, one neon red, the other a pulsing purple, remained side by side in the debris, seemingly maintaining a watch on the ruins.

At some undefinable time in that unending black, a small snuffling creature padded past the two grubs and fell asleep nearby, its feelers and antennae vibrating as it snored.

"You see?" came a very small voice near the ground.

"Doom," came another voice. "Yes, I think you're right. I think we've reached the limit."

"It's the end, finally."

The snuffling creature rolled over in its sleep and made a grunting noise.

"Did you hear that, Robert?"

"Yes, I did, dear."

"You know, it almost sounded like..."

A long tongue flicked out and scooped the two grubs into the creature's questing maw. "Food, eat," Peter murmured drowsily as he went back to sleep, "good."

Later, as it probed through the blackness with its feelers and sensory arrays, the creature sometimes heard two small shrill voices somewhere inside, barking incomprehensibly, and sometimes it heard something familiar: "Boom, boom," or the like. But these annoying chirps were always drowned out by the creature's own primal emotions: the gnaw of hunger, the surge of victory, and always, the simple violent joy of living on.

The Court of Xaxas

The Court of Xaxas' is universally defamed by foreigners; they call its decisions whimsical and its punishments stern, or even harsh. They cite the cases of men broiled alive in glass cauldrons before fascinated crowds, or stretched and bled on the skewer-rack till drained of fluids, all in retribution for crimes as petty as spitting in public, or urinating in a disused corridor. All these charges have an outward plausibility, and are perhaps literally true, but there is more to the process of the Xaxasi Court than such isolated moments imply.

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(1) A name that no scholars have been able to identify. As with other elements of the manuscript it remains apocryphal. It must be emphasized that the 'Xaxas' document is offered in translation here only as an historical curio.

I myself witnessed a man being titrated through a tube one inch in diameter only last week, and for the apparently inconsequential offence of belching at an inappropriate moment during a drinking song. But do I cry "Injustice"? Do I squeam and wince at the sight of practically applied law? I do not, for I see below the veneer of Xaxasi law to the heart-core, to the essence: and I state here in refutation of all critics that the Court of Xaxas is the highest, the most noble and perfect legal system ever assayed by humanity.

I find that in my purpose of vindicating the Court's practices I have no recourse but to cite a somewhat lengthy personal anecdote, which I hope my readers will take as neither overtedious, nor as spurious entertainment, nor yet as mere sympathy-garnering for the tragedy which has befallen me.

To those who would accuse me of bias, I freely admit that I myself am a member of the Xaxasi Court. I have been prosecutor, counsel, and defendant at various times, as have all the inhabitants of the Court. I also confess that the foreign slanders I now refute have been drawn from sources less than ideal; I have in fact taken them all from a few slender, ancient volumes found by accident in my study. But I ask, how could it be otherwise? I am a citizen of the 67th Undercourt of the Great Court of Xaxas, and like all other members of my generation I have never left this single floor of the great building in which I dwell.

This is due to the simple fact that the Great Court has grown to such vast dimensions that one might spend a lifetime wandering its sloping corridors, passing by libraries, subcourts, gaols, maintenance areas, and architectural follies of every

variety, without ever finding the limits of even this, the sixty-seventh floor and Undercourt. Though a few claim as an article of faith that somewhere there must be stairs leading down to the sixty-sixth, and up to the sixty-eighth, such stairs have never been discovered, and need not exist. Communications from the sixty-eighth reach us in the form of memos, slips of paper that flutter down from pipes overhead; our own contact with the sixty-sixth Undercourt is of similar nature, while food and other bulky materials are conveyed up and down through a sophisticated system of dumbwaiters.

How many Undercourts are there? How many floors comprise the Great Court of Xaxas? I have direct evidence of the sixty-eighth, sixty-ninth, and seventieth floors, unconfirmed rumors of a seventy-first, and wild legends of a paradisiacal seventy-ninth. The exact figure remains unknown, though atmospheric and gravitational considerations suggest a number no greater than four hundred. Still, even this is speculation.

What I truly know of the Court are my own environs: the anterior and under-subcourts of the main 116th District Subcourt, where I work, the twists and turns of the residential area of the District's Fifth Octant, which I navigate on my way home, and the six rooms of my apartment in the South-East Quarter, where I live modestly with my seven-year old son, Ignatius-- his mother having passed on some years ago by cause of a lost personal liability suit. Ignatius and I live in moderate comfort, worse off than some and better off than many, for though I have voided or avoided any terminally-inclined suits brought against me, and on the other hand prosecuted

successfully my share of prestigious cases, I am no saint, and must occasionally suffer damaging charges against my account. So my career has fluctuated.

A few weeks ago I ran across an old acquaintance of mine, one Osmius by name, during the sentencing of a case for which I had served successfully as prosecutor. It was a case of some gravity; in fact, it involved the man whose belching eventually resulted in the penalty of titration, as I mentioned earlier.

"Ho! Osmius!" I cried as I spotted my old friend in the crowds at the back of the under-subcourt. "Osmius! Ho! Over here! I haven't seen you in years!-- in fact, not since I was called as a witness at your character-deprecation trial."

Oddly, Osmius jerked back in a panic when he turned and saw me-- but almost instantly he relaxed, laughing and gesticulating in a jocular fashion with the three digits remaining on his left hand, a reminder to both of us of the sad outcome of that trial.

"I remember that day well," he said. "Still, I consider myself to have received the best end of the *jalai*[2]. I would rather do without these two extremities than the single one the prosecution ravened after. But enough of my problems! You seem to have achieved a notable success of some sort here today." Osmius indicated the gang of cheering under-prosecutors chanting my name in praise.

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(2) A figure of speech which does not translate well. A *jalai*--literally, 'spike-and-bludgeon-ended-stick-of-justice'--was apparently an antiquated instrument of the Xaxasi Court, here referred to metaphorically. The *jalai*'s spiked end was employed upon sexual offenders, who could, with a successful appeal for clemency, have the penalty reduced and so suffer only the stroke of the club-tipped end.

"It was no great victory," I said. "The felon released an especially gaseous and pungent exhalation during a round-table rendition of 'The Old Shank-Hall' in a local drinkery, and caused several patrons to leave prematurely, by reason of extreme disgust. One of these individuals, on his way home, precipitated himself head-first down a refuse-chute, with the result of fatalization; and in further consequence, when the victim's spouse learned of his fate, she abandoned reason and hurled herself in a mortal manner after him. The defence tried to cite the victim's drunkenness as the prime motivator in the tragedy, but this feeble excuse found little sympathy with the judge. The belcher's exhalation remained the obvious actuating event, and as a long-standing member of the community he had no grounds on which to claim ignorance of the possible consequences. As you know, the Court does not hand out punishments so extreme as titration lightly."

"Save in times of great excess of population."

"Of course. But in this case it was felt no lesser rebuke would suffice."

"Indeed, indeed."

Osmius and I had taken ourselves from the crowded under-subcourt to a nearby corridor, where we could speak more easily. Osmius, seeming a bit nervous, cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you would care to take your repast with me," he said, "and discuss other matters of import and interest, both old and new. In addition, further monologization may be performed from a seated position, which is more comfortable for both of us."

"You are correct," I replied, chastened. "My verbosity was excessive. And as to the matter of lunch, I would be delighted to have your company, provided naturally that I have a guarantee, in writing, that I may be held responsible neither in whole nor in part, in causal, coincidental, or acausal fashion, for any incidents, injuries, slights, sicknesses or other malevents occurring to your person either before or immediately after our meal, or in the future as a result of substances or vapours ingested or inhaled during the aforementioned period, or by reason of any occurrences whatsoever during this time."

We were longtime friends, and so I limited myself to this abbreviated statement of non-culpability, and Osmius only interjected a short clause voiding my innocence in the event of deliberate acts of violence or poisoning before jotting his signature across the standard mutual food-consumption contract-- the "non-culp lunch" as it is commonly called.

Osmius put casual questions to me as we ate in the local galateria. "And your boy Ignatius-- how is he bearing up these days?"

"Well enough," I replied. "He comes of culpability in three weeks; I hope I have prepared him sufficiently."

"Yes, very much so," Osmius agreed. "The pummeling shock of reality is cushioned greatly by forewarning, if never wholly eliminated."

I detected a bitter tone in my friend's statements. "And you, Osmius? How have you fared lately?"

"Not so well," he admitted. "I decided to repair a leaky gas-valve in my apartment recently, and the nail I used accidentally punctured a hidden ventilation-tube. Though there were no immediate effects, apparently a series of discombobulations was set off by this event, with the result that when a bedroom ceiling some thirty-five miles west collapsed in the middle of the night, my errant nail was found by the litigators to be the initial cause of the incident."

"Surely you were able to contest their case!"

Osmius made a three-fingered gesture to the effect that it made little difference. "I spread my culpability through corollary suits against local maintenance workers. Still I was found guilty, fined heavily, and sentenced to some two hundred hours cleaning the sewage-shafts by means of a winch attached to my ankle. All in all, it was not the best possible outcome."

The conversation continued in this trivial vein for some time. At last our speech fell into a lull; Osmius stared down at his victuals, seemingly troubled by some interior dialogue. After long moments he looked up again and readied himself to speak, as if reluctantly.

"We have been close friends for many years now, have we not?"

"Indeed! I still recall the hours we spent together as children, roaming disused corridors and abandoned under-subcourts."

Osmius nodded, but seemed unwilling to meet my gaze. "Strange, isn't it, how things have changed since then, when we were simply two innocent boys, free of

culpability. Today, you are a well-respected prosecutor; and I, I am nothing, a stain upon--"

He went on. His wallowing self-pity made me distinctly uncomfortable. "Come, Osmius! It is not so bad as all that. Fortunes fluctuate, mine as well as yours: you perhaps are merely experiencing the nadir of the cycle."

"No," he said slowly, "I am confident that my failure is no variable, but a constant. I ask myself: how did this happen? How did our paths diverge so wildly? I can come to only one conclusion: it was you. Even as a child you were always more talented, more vivacious, more clever than me. Doubtless this had its concomitant negative effect on me in those formative years, conditioning me towards a state of inferiority."

I was stunned and embarrassed. "Surely you don't believe that!"

Osmius finally met my stare. He spoke reluctantly, as though the words were fighting their way up his throat and vocal apparatus. "I do indeed believe that," he said. "In fact, I have filed suit against you for damages."

"What? This-- this is mad!" I sputtered when I was again capable of speech. "We've been friends for decades! Why now do you turn and attack me?"

"It is you who betrayed me, old friend; in those faraway days of youth when you warped me forever towards the path of failure and humiliation."

I actually began to reach across the table for Osmius before I caught myself. I took several deep breaths to quell my fury. Osmius, looking hatefully smug, peered at me.

"Regardless of your crazed accusations," I said at last when I was calm, "the court cannot help but note that the events you describe occurred in our childhood-- before the age of culpability. This alone voids your case."

Osmius cracked a slow, hideously self-satisfied grin. "Not so. While we were at that time beyond legal prosecution, your crime was of an extended nature: it did not take full effect until several years ago. Thus, both the crime and the criminal fall within legal bounds of culpability; your age at the time the crime was committed is of only marginal relevance."

"We shall see," I said coldly, getting to my feet. "When we meet in court rest assured I will demand severe penalties for the personal emotional trauma you have just inflicted on me. You still have many extremities left, Osmius."

He only shrugged. I stormed away, almost forgetting to pay my account for the food-- a fine thing *that* would have been on top of Osmius' charges!

Over the next week I prepared myself for the case, though I was much distracted by the training I was obliged to give Ignatius in the matter of his upcoming birthday. There were two flaws in Osmius' suit, I felt: first, the difficulty he would have in avoiding the non-culpability age rulings, and second, his lack of evidence. I concentrated on exploiting these weaknesses.

The case was heard in the same under-subcourt where I had met Osmius only the other week. At first, all went well: the judge was skeptical indeed of Osmius' sophistic arguments voiding my non-culpability.

Unfortunately, Osmius made up for the weakness of his argument with a plethora of evidence. On the second day of testimony, he produced two simple paintings that we had done as children.

"Observe," said Osmius, "the difference in quality between the two. Mine-- a pathetic collection of scrawls and blots. His-- admittedly still childish, but see the strength of line! The forcefulness of color! No wonder, then, that the praise of parents and teachers strengthened and encouraged the defendant, while impressing upon me my own basic uselessness and futility of existence!"

There was a murmur of appreciation for this argument throughout the courtroom. Naturally I attacked Osmius' 'evidence,' shredded his logic-- but even as I did so I sensed the trap I was entering.

"And so," I said on the sixth day of hearings, "it becomes blatantly obvious that the prosecution's use of these paintings as evidence rests on subjective artistic merits. Better? Worse? Who can decide? Remember, if you will, the case last year involving a literary critic whose negative commentaries were found to be unfairly subjective, and hence grievously harmful to his victims! Let us not forget the punishment which the court, in its wisdom, meted out to him!"

As I sat, Osmius rose. "I agree with the defence wholeheartedly," he said. "My argument is feeble and, moreover, reprehensible. Still, I must ask that this exchange be put on the record as further evidence of my main thrust. As has become obvious, the defendant's legal skill far exceeds mine. Why is this? Is it not due to the pressure exerted on me as a youth by the defendant's superior talent?"

The judge paused, thinking, then instructed the transcribers to mark my refutation as evidence for the prosecution; I groaned quietly to myself.

Osmius produced legal tutors who admitted that my work as a boy had been far superior to his. He brought in experts in psychological workings who vouched for his theory of enforced inferiority through prolonged contact with a more talented peer. Soon I realized I was losing the case-- my only hope lay in direct appeal to the strict age-of-culpability rulings.

"Despite all the prosecutor's arguments, one basic fact remains: the alleged crime occurred when I was but a boy, and below the age of accepted responsibility. To ignore this is to call into question the laws governing the onset of culpability-- the very basis of our legal system!"

The judge seemed to take my comments seriously. However, after deliberation, he addressed the court thusly:

"It is true that this case challenges our precepts concerning the onset of responsibility. However, if our precepts are faulty, there is no sense in maintaining them against all logic. In this case I am convinced that a crime of magnitude was committed. Though this may indeed weaken the age-of-culpability rulings, I must now rule in favor of the prosecutor. If a culprit may escape from justice merely by pleading his youth and inexperience, surely our system of law has failed."

I sat insensate during the rest of the address. Even as the list of damages to be paid and suffered was determined I remained numb.

This state persisted for the next several days. When my fiduciary account was seized to recompense Osmius for his general financial failings, I cared little. When my apartment was repossessed to replace Osmius' puny box-hovel, I took Ignatius to an empty galateria, where we slept. It was only when appointees of the court tied my hand to a block and produced a knife that my senses began to register.

When the second finger on my right hand was excised I experienced a sudden revelatory flash. Perhaps, after all, Osmius was not incorrect. Perhaps he was *right*--why should a mandatory age-ruling hinder the process of justice? More than the pain, the sudden understanding blinded me, brought tears to my eyes. Three words came into my mind, three words that have guided my career ever since: infinite retrograde culpability.

I write this now on the eve of my son Ignatius' eighth birthday, whereupon he reaches the age of responsible existence. Though I have tried to educate him well, there is one datum I have not imparted to him, and this is that tomorrow I will press charges against him seeking recompense for the mental trauma inflicted on me over the past years by his youthful foolishness.

It will be, admittedly, an unpopular case, and another one that apparently seeks to circumvent the culpable-age rulings, but I believe I can win. There is no reason why we should arbitrarily set an age at which responsibility comes: if we are to arrive at a truly just methodology we must set aside sentimentality and pursue cause and effect to their utmost limits.

And so, if all goes well, we shall turn our attention to the concept of infinite culpability, as, I now believe, we were always meant to do. And one day the mesh of law we weave will grow so fine that we catch not only ourselves in this net but the Universe. Retrogressive culpability must have a limit, and when finally on some unforeseeable but inevitable day we reach that limit, we will hold such a reckoning: we will know and prosecute all the infamies ever committed against us, our sons and fathers, our sons' sons and fathers' fathers, from the beginning to the end of measured time; we shall reward the virtuous and free the innocent while punishing without error the guilty; we shall hold reality itself liable for damages; we shall, at long last, see Justice done.

I will affix my seal to this manuscript and deliver it via mail-tube to the sixty-seventh Undercourt, with instructions that it be passed down to the sixty-sixth, then sixty-fifth, all the way down until someday it may reach the barbaric lands outside the Court-- if indeed by then there is anything that is outside the Court. And thus I achieve my purpose, as stated earlier, and hereby refute criticisms, any and all, directed against the Great Court of Xaxas.[3]

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(3) The manuscript ends here, and is appended by a gloss of rough notes on various aspects of Xaxasi law. Once more it should be repeated that no mention of any entity known as 'Xaxas' has yet been discovered, nor has any trace of the 'Great Court' been brought to light. Beyond these facts, common sense alone argues against the manuscript's veracity. For where, in the countless stone halls, corridors, chambers, and confines that make up the world could an edifice as huge as this Court possibly be constructed? In the end the educated reader must dismiss the manuscript as false: an amusing whimsy, but no more.

Bones

I found the first, the skull I mean, in the backyard garden. I'm not much of a gardener myself, I was just turning the dirt over a bit so Lauren would be happy when she came out to plant her seeds and whatever-- and there it was, staring up from in between my feet. There was something about it, like something I heard once, that there are some kinds of shapes and images hardwired into the brain. You never learn them, they're just there, like a baby knowing what a person looks like though it's never seen one before. A skull is the same way, I think, like you could be driving down the road at a hundred miles an hour and if there was a skull off in the ditch you'd still see it.

Anyway I guess I shouted, though I didn't scream like Lauren thought when she came running out of the house, as if I'd chopped off a hand or a foot or something. We both stared down at the skull. I sure didn't like the look of the thing, but Lauren picked it up like it was a toy. She just seemed happily surprised, not worried that there was some kind of dead thing in the backyard.

I mean, it wasn't a human skull, that much was obvious even to me. It was about the same size, but sort of stretched out, with these long oval eyesockets. Lauren said it looked old, but I wasn't so sure. It was brown and yellow and kind of cracked, but what does that prove?

I didn't think much of letting her keep it, I just remember it didn't seem worthwhile to argue about it. She washed it off and put it in a box downstairs. Why? I asked, and she just said she was curious about it. Well, okay, I said.

When she came in and showed me the next thing, it must have been two or three days later, naturally I wanted to know where she'd found it, just a normal question, no reason for her to lie about it. But how could it have been in the flowerbed which I remember her digging and planting just a few weeks ago? I mean, obviously it had come from the garden again, and that was what I resented really, not her wanting to keep the second bone, just her not telling me the truth.

She got angry when I confronted her about it, but as usual didn't come out and admit she was, instead getting very calm and insisting that yes, it had been in the flowerbed out front, and what reason could she possibly have to lie about such a thing? But anyway, the thing, the second bone, looked like a boomerang, about two

feet long with a funny curve in the middle. It made me nervous on account of thinking, what kind of animal did *that* come from? Whatever, it was for sure dead now-- for a long time if Lauren's claims that these bones were "old looking" were right. So she kept that one too.

I remember being very reasonable with her, saying, you know, you never know what sort of germs or bugs might be living inside those things. Just common sense stuff. But no, she said, I washed them, didn't I? Well, I tried to humor her, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're exactly clean, does it, I said, and she got angry again, I could tell, and pretended she wasn't.

I've put up with worse from Lauren, so I thought I'd just ride it out, wait till she forgot about her backyard archaeology and then throw the damn things out. Seemed the easiest thing to do, but then one night when Phil and his wife came over for a barbecue I realized she wasn't forgetting at all. Me and Phil were just standing around, talking about whether or not Andy was going to get the boot from the office where we work, when Lauren comes out of the house with that box.

Oh come on, I said. She said she wanted to show it to Phil's wife who had studied paleontology or anthropology or something in college. Great, just the thing to get our appetites up, I said, but she went ahead anyway. Phil's wife mustn't have studied the right ology, though, because she didn't have any better idea than me what kind of animal the bones were from, though she tried to cover up her ignorance with some jabber about strange phylas, or something like that. I guess it would have blown over and not gotten embarrassing, except that when we went over to the little firepit

in the back yard, sure enough, what does Phil pick up? Another weird bone, about the size and shape of a matchbook. You would have thought it was a fragment from a bigger piece except it was all smooth, with funny little ridges running around it. Got a regular ancient Indian burial site here, don't you, he joked.

Well, there was a lot of the sort of stupid speculation you'd expect then, Agatha Christie plots etc. etc., and they all seemed to find it pretty funny. Of course Lauren didn't realize they were laughing at *us,* not the stupid bones. Hey, you ever see *Poltergeist*? Yeah, ha ha.

I don't understand why you're getting so upset about this, she said after. I wasn't getting upset. I said, I just wonder why someone had to bring out a bunch of filthy dead things during dinner, I wonder why they went and did that? She said, I can't talk to you, I can see you're in your stupid mood today.

Well, I guess with me that'll pass, won't it, I said.

Things were a little strained for the next while with me and Lauren so I stayed late at the office a lot. I had work to do anyway, and I enjoyed it more than I would have squabbling with Lauren.

But of course as with anything you ignore, the problem didn't go away, it just got worse. I looked in the box one day and there weren't three bones in there, there were six. The new ones were just as unidentifiable as the others. There was a curve that might have been a rib except it went almost all the way around, like a hoop with a bite out of it. Then there was a straight solid cylindrical bone, and a strange pyramidal thing with little round dimples.

Lauren when asked was evasive, as usual these days. Flowerbed again, I said. No, I found two of them in the garden when I was planting seeds, she said. That's impossible, I told her, I dug up the whole thing and I didn't see anything like that. Well, that's where they were. Well, what about the other one then? I found that in the basement, she said.

We argued for a while but later when she was calmer I got the story she insisted on, that she was cleaning up some junk down there and found the bitten-hoop bone behind our old TV set. Well, where do you think it came from, I said, and she said she didn't know, but that part of the wall down there was crumbling a little and maybe that's where.

The walls are crumbling, I said. Are they.

I don't know, maybe I was being unfair to her but it seemed somehow it couldn't be unconnected. Didn't she think it was funny how all these bones start turning up just when she starts having an obsession with dead things? Calm again, no, she said, I don't think there's any causal relation there, but if you do I guess it's you that's got the obsession. All right, I said, I guess I do, I guess I have an obsession with the fact that there are weird rotting old bones under and in the house I put down a year's salary on, and, oh yeah, the walls are crumbling too, I guess you're right, yeah I must have some kind of obsession all right.

I can't talk to you right now.

Oh, I must be having a stupid mood again, I said.

So then she gave up on the calm act.

Eventually she stomped off to the bedroom and I went out, thought about going to a movie, thought about going to a friend's place, but it didn't seem worth the effort so I just drove around watching the scenery go away. There's a tree, there's a house, there's a boy walking his dog, but at thirty miles an hour they're there and they're gone, you don't have to stare them in the face for years on end.

But I came back and Lauren calmed down, for real, and I tried to put it out of my mind. We avoided talking about the bones, but I did have someone come in to look at the basement wall. It's an older house, he told me, what can you expect? I'm not sure what I expected, I said, but it sure wasn't this.

In August it started to rain a lot and then it got worse, everything. I went outside and stepped in a puddle and felt something crunch, looked down and it looked like a chicken bone but it wasn't. Lauren found what looked like a miniature human ribcage in the washoff under the water spout, or at least she said she found it there. Towards the end of the month another section of the basement wall fell in, and in and around the wet concrete there were bits of cracked yellow-brown material.

I called the insurance company, but the guy just asked me if the bones had been there in the house when I bought it. I didn't see them, I said. But could they have been there already? I guessed they could have been. Well then, he said, you see the problem?

I couldn't sleep. How could I when the house was falling apart around me. Can't sell it, who'd buy after taking one look? The mortgage was hanging around my neck for the next twenty-three years. Lauren was no use, she said it would be all right

and we'd do some repairs ourself in the spring, but really what did she care? Her name wasn't on the mortgage.

I started to screw up at work because of it all. Lauren couldn't grasp the kind of pressures I was under and insisted on annoying me in little ways. Her obsession with the bones was becoming psychotic and things seemed to happen because of it. I went into the washroom and when I turned the faucet there was no water, just a gurgling and rattling sound. A second later brown sludge starts coughing out of it, and there are little pings as these tiny bones, they look like teeth, hit the porcelain and go down the drain.

I called the plumber and they said two days, so I get to go to work stinking and unshaved. I'm not stupid, I tell them when they call me into the office, I'm just having a few problems at home right now, okay? But they're more supportive than critical, and eventually we decide together I should take a week vacation to straighten things out. Supportive, yeah, but there's that humorous look they have when they say straighten things out, and suddenly I'm sure Phil's been talking around since that barbecue. But I have to smile and take it like I don't know.

I get home and Lauren in this quiet scaredy-mouse way that she knows will annoy me tells me that the rain must be seeping into the walls, there's a whole section in our bedroom going wet and soft. And this just happened naturally? I said. This just had to happen while I was away? I don't know what you're talking about, she said in that little fake mousy voice. No? I went into the bedroom and started punching and tearing at the soggy drywall, and when it falls apart, a tangle of slimy bones collapses

into the room. There are a couple more long corkscrew skulls in the mess. Here's a few extra for your collection, I said. This isn't my fault, she said, I didn't do anything. No of course not, it must just be your lucky day.

We fought some more but she still didn't want to leave, I guess she figured she could save rent on an apartment for a few more months by staying. We weren't sleeping together any more, then, much, but we used the same bed. Late that night I suddenly felt sure of something and I got up and went into the back yard. It hadn't stopped raining, and there in the middle of the yard was a huge mud puddle, with these things sticking up out of it at sharp angles, like they'd erupted out of the ground. In the morning I dragged Lauren out there and asked her what she thought she was doing. I mean they didn't just pop up on their own, did they? Someone had to have dug them up, didn't they? She pretended to start crying, pretty easy to do in the rain, and later I called the gas company, just in case a pipe had burst under our house or something, but the guy they sent out said no, and just looked at me weird, and at those bones jutting up out of the ground.

Another section of wall fell in, in the living room, and there was what looked like a whole skeleton glistening on the carpet, all disjointed. There were rods and tubes and things that I knew didn't come from a human skeleton, but still there was an eerie resemblance.

The basement flooded later on. There were things floating in it brown and yellow. More teeth came out of the faucet despite the plumber's huge bill and this time I saved them from going down the drain.

Lauren finally stopped pretending to cry and hugged me and said she was sorry for whatever she'd done, and why didn't we just go to a hotel, send for people to come have a look at the house and see what was wrong. Where would all this magic money come from, I told her, and anyway the house isn't going to fix itself overnight while we're at the Ramada Inn.

She kept arguing and arguing and I guess I got a bit mad. The house is falling apart, the insurance is no good, people at work are laughing at me and why did she ever have to start collecting those damn bones anyway? I guess I said it was all her fault which I know doesn't sound logical, but somehow I felt it was, and anyway like I said, I guess maybe I got a bit out of hand.

She ran off then, but I didn't really care at the time. I collected all the bones. There were shoals of them drifting around in the basement, more of them sticking up out of the grass in the front yard, and I brought them all into the living room and put them on the carpet which was ruined by then anyway. I started thinking how they could go together, how this piece would fit onto this other piece, and then I got some masking tape and contact cement and tried it. After a while I had something, I wasn't sure if it was how they had gone together in the first place, but it was possible, it looked solid, sturdy enough to withstand centuries of age and weather, it looked a little bit like me. I took my shirt and pants off and put them on it and they fit okay. I picked it up and it was light but held together, and I went into the bedroom and was surprised to see Lauren in there sleeping. She must have come back in earlier without

my noticing. I was, I admit, I was distracted. I felt guilty about leaving her alone so I put the thing on my side of the bed. She always said I was bony anyway.

I didn't want to wake her up so I went out into the living room and fell asleep on the couch in my underwear, having moved all the bones into a big heap on the carpet.

I was woken up in the morning when Lauren shrieked and came running out of the bedroom, making this weird blubbering sound. I couldn't help it, I started laughing. She just looked so funny standing there in her underwear like that.

She got hysterical and started crying and ran out of the house with nothing but her purse, and it was still raining, so I guess she must have been cold. But I didn't see her again after that so I can't say for sure.

Anyway there was more work to do in the living room and I got started. Here I had something that might have been a dog with one eye and three legs, but it looked good on the coffee table. Lauren always wanted a dog, but I just told her I was allergic. I brought the other thing out of the bedroom, and it looked like it wanted to watch TV, so I put it on the couch and crossed what might have been its legs. And here was its baby boy or girl with its long snouted skull that I had to glue on, and it wanted to sit beside father and watch TV too.

I keep thinking the rain will stop, but it just seems to keep on and on. In the flooded basement there are always more bones floating up, and sometimes I think that sooner or later I'll have them all and I'll be able to figure out where they came from, what they are, dinosaurs or something, but at other times I don't think I ever will. I

don't think I ever will know. The water downstairs must be getting into the wiring, because once in a while the power goes, and upstairs where we're watching TV it gets dark, sometimes for a few seconds, sometimes for almost an hour, and then I just sit there beside the other two and listen to the rain.

I wish Lauren would come back. I've started to look at some of the bones, thinking, this curve reminds me of her back, this reminds me of her leg just above the knee, and how they might fit together, and sooner or later I'm afraid I'll try it. I'm scared of what'll happen then. When they're all done I'm scared they won't need me any more and when the lights and TV go off for good I'll just sit here beside them, watching the blue light from the window shining off the tops of their heads. Watching them smiling. As if they could do anything else. And their hands linked together on the couch.

Happy Eating on Ugrath 3: A Model for Study

START REPORT

04/06/99 HardCopy File For Reference
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TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / ***Administrative Division***

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / ***Ugrath 3***

Dear Mr. Nogren,

Congratulations on your safe planetfall on Ugrath 3, and the problem-free set-up of HappyFood Franchise #2232575! We suggest you immediately begin

thawing the Food Processing Clerks in your freezer-- FPCs require a few days of orientation and training before they are competent to work the HappyFood Franchise equipment.

As you know, Ugrath 3 is a small world which has been out of direct contact with the Core for some forty years now. Nonetheless it is a prestigious assignment for a HappyFood Franchise Manager! The colonists have been living on a limited diet of local foodstuffs, and in general have large credit accounts due to the lack of consumer outposts. The time is ripe for Ugrath 3 to have a HappyFood Franchise established.

Remember Yucatan 5!

Eighty years ago it was a small colony like Ugrath 3, but thanks to assertive marketing HappyFood Inc. now has over 300,000 Franchises there while the competition has been unable to gain a significant foothold.

While training your Food Processing Clerks, we suggest you have them use HappyFood Inc.'s new slogan as often as possible, especially at the conclusion of a transaction. Studies have shown that this kind of repetition will embed the desired associations in subjects within a short time.

Remember: "Healthy, hearty, happy eating to you!"

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / *Administrative Division*

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / *Ugrath 3*

Dear Mr. Nogren,

We are happy to see from your account files that your HappyFood Franchise is off to a good start. But by no means can you rest on your laurels yet! Action must be taken to consolidate the gains made during this initial period.

Your present markup rate of 240% is acceptable, but in light of the Ugrath 3 colonists' high disposable income, and the lack of competition at present, we feel it would be wise to increase this to 300% over a two-month period.

One other suggestion is in order. You do not mention having trained your Food Processing Clerks for suggestive merchandising. If you have not, proceed to with all dispatch!

The procedure is simple and well within the FPCs' capabilities. For example: if a customer buys the Jumbo Bacon Barbecue HappyBurger (Simulated), have the FPC ask if they would like the Cheesy PotatoSkins (Simulated) with it, while nodding their head slightly up and down. Studies show that even the suggestion of a nod increases the customer's chances of saying yes. Don't be afraid to aggressively utilize suggestive merchandising! Choice is a burden to most customers, and they will be pleased to have your staff suggest food item selections.

Healthy, hearty, happy eating to you!

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / ***Administrative Division***

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / ***Ugrath 3***

Dear Mr. Nogren:

Recent invoices from your HappyFood Franchise indicate a period of slowed growth. Going over your daily reports, we believe we have pinpointed the problem.

There seems to be a misunderstanding, on your part, of the Truth in Food Marketing codes. While food unit archives and daypart reports must, indeed, list a particular meal's full title, it is unnecessary to print it on your menu, or to have your Food Processing Clerks pronounce it during transactions. Specifically, we see your menu lists items like the "Happy Simulated LobsterPak" and "Milk-Substitute-Reconstitute Happyshake." It is not necessary to include the terms "Simulated" or "Milk-Substitute-Reconstitute" in the names of these items. In fact, we strongly suggest you discontinue the use of such terms, as we believe they are responsible for the dip in your day profit reports.

In other developments at HappyFood Inc., some recent outbreaks of scombroid on developing planets have been traced to contaminated morlen, a mainstay

of the Happy Seafood Menu. Consequently, HappyFood Inc. has decided to discontinue the use of the HappyMorlen food product, item number 343-86ux in your catalog. From this time onward, food item 343-86ux must be referred to in all cases as HappyFish.

Healthy, hearty, happy eating to you!

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / ***Administrative Division***

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / ***Ugrath 3***

Dear Mr. Nogren,

We are happy to see that you have complied with our advice regarding the daypart menu terminology. Perhaps not coincidentally, your accounts indicate that the Ugrath 3 Franchise is now growing rapidly in popularity with the colonists. At this rate, your franchise will soon be one of the most profitable and prestigious establishments in HappyFood Inc.'s galaxy-wide chain.

On a more somber note: we are sorry to hear about the demise of two of your Food Processing Clerks in a microwave accident. Still, remember the clone tanks in your Franchise can generate replacements within a few weeks. We have sent a copy of HappyFood Inc.'s FPC Training Videodisc #4354 along with this month's

shipment of food materials. This enjoyable vid uses advanced subliminal imagery to teach your FPCs to deal with death or maiming due to laser burns or radiation spills in a cheerful manner that will not interfere with their regular duties. If you watch this vid yourself, remember to wear the enclosed protective glasses to prevent any unintentional b-mod spillover.

You also mention some requests by the Ugrath 3 colonists for information on the nutritive makeup of HappyFood products. By all means give them a copy of HappyFood Inc.'s InfoBook #3490, detailing the healthy, natural, wholesome materials HappyFood products are made of and/or inspired by. Regarding Unigel, the principal taste component of some meals: do not give your customers erroneous information regarding this substance! Remember, HappyFood Inc. won the 2095 court case in which Unigel was alleged to possess certain deleterious and addictive properties.

Healthy, hearty, happy eating to you and your customers!

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / ***Administrative Division***

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / ***Ugrath 3***

Dear Mr. Nogren,

We are concerned with your latest report which indicates you have introduced new menu items to the morning daypart menu, incorporating local foodstuffs. You should be well aware of HappyFood Inc.'s policy on new menu items: it is necessary first to submit Form XVI (Request for New Food Item Approval), listing the proposed item's name, portion, yield, unit servings, advance instructions, ingredients, procedure, and storage information, so that the Research & Development division can examine and test it. While it is often profitable to incorporate local foods into your menu, HappyFood Inc. uses a standardized recipe system for a good reason. Travellers from different planets are always assured of receiving a familiar meal at a HappyFood Franchise, with no need to risk the possible hazards and unpleasantries of local foods which may be somewhat exotic to the traveller. Hence, in the future please submit any menu items like this "Bacon and Eggs" you suggest to Head Office for prior verification.

We feel certain you will correct this small problem and go on to make HappyFood Franchise #2232575 a profitable link in the chain of HappyFood Franchises stretching across the galaxy. In fact, we insist you implement the aforementioned measures immediately.

Healthy, hearty, happy eating to you!

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / *Internal Monitoring Division*

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / *Ugrath 3*

Mr. Nogren:

We here at the Internal Monitoring branch of HappyFood Inc. are sorry to say that the reports sent us by Head Office concerning your HappyFood Franchise on Ugrath 3 are quite disappointing. As you are aware, you were chosen for this prestigious post on the basis of your past performance with the HappyFood chain of food processing establishments; however, the most recent information received from your Franchise is forcing us to consider disciplinary action.

You have received repeated warnings to desist in various nonstandard procedures: excessive discounting, unauthorized food item introductions, and unnecessary food composition documentation. Despite your assurances of compliance, all our data indicate you are continuing in these nonstandard practices. In addition we have reason to believe the suggestive merchandising training of your Food Processing Clerks has been substandard. But even more disturbing than these problems is the recent rumor of 'redecorations' supposedly undertaken in your HappyFood Franchise. We must order you, in no uncertain terms, to stop any such modifications and return the Franchise to its regulated appearance.

HappyFood Franchises on the various colonized planets are to remain as similiar as possible in all regards; this is merely an extension of the policy of standardized recipes. A HappyFood customer should be able to enter an establishment

light-years away from his or her home and feel comfortable, as if he or she were returning to a familiar place, not entering some bizarre, foreign, possibly dangerous eatery; also to this end, the Food Processing Clerk clones are designed with standardized facial features. The lighting and furnishings of the standard HappyFood Franchise have been carefully researched and designed for optimum effect, producing an impression of comfort from a distance, which gradually fades upon continued exposure or actual contact with the flexiplastic chairs. In this fashion both the demands of "initial appeal" and "quick turnaround" are satisfied, as customers are encouraged to enter the establishment but discouraged from the act of loitering.

Cease with these "ambient lighting" and "padded seat" experiments; remove any tables and furnishings of plant fiber and replace them with the standard flexiplastic. If you have stopped broadcasting the HappyTunes music product over your interior speakers, resume immediately.

We hope that these disciplinary problems can be quickly forgotten, and that your HappyFood Franchise will go on to be satisfactory in all regards. Still, we must emphasize that noncompliance will result in the termination of your position as Manager of HappyFood Franchise #2232575.

Healthy, hearty, happy eating to you and your customers.

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / *Administrative Division*

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / *Ugrath 3*

Mr. Nogren:

Your behavior has exceeded all the prescribed bounds of HappyFood Inc. professionalism. As of this date, you are relieved of your post as Manager of HappyFood Franchise #2232575. Close the establishment immediately and return to Head Office for disciplinary action. Another Manager will be sent to Ugrath 3 shortly to undo the damage you have caused.

It is a blemish on HappyFood Inc.'s reputation that you have been allowed to continue in your course for as long as this. Recently we discovered that many of your food invoices have been falsified, and that you have discontinued the use of many standard food items, particularly the HappyFish product and those consisting of or using additives of Unigel, in favor of food items harvested and eaten locally. This alone would be bad enough to warrant your removal, but various other indiscretions have been uncovered. Hidden monitors in the Franchise indicate that many customers linger in your establishment for up to three hours, a completely unacceptable period of time. You have allowed your Food Processing Clerks an unheard-of degree of autonomy, to the point that few if any still wear their regulation flexi-uniforms; some, apparently, have been allowed to cultivate cranial hair growth of nonstandard appearance. That your profit analyses still show favorably has yet to be explained-- the suspicion is that these too have been falsified.

Perhaps you are aware of how disruptive your activities are, and how devastating to HappyFood Inc. it would be if such practices became standard: soon each Franchise would be different, enabling local entrepreneurs to successfully compete with us, drastically slashing profits.

In light of all this, your farwave transmitter has been disabled by remote signal, a contingency built into the equipment for just such rare occasions as this. Do not bother trying to call for friends or colleagues to take you off-planet. Your automated shuttle will not respond to your course orders, but will instead take you directly to Head Office for your disciplinary treatment.

There will be no further warnings. Return immediately on pain of extreme disciplinary action.

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood INCORPORATED / ***Administrative Division***

RECEV stn HappyFood Franchise #2232575 / ***Ugrath 3***

Nogren:

You were warned.

A division of Internal Monitoring Armed Response troubleshooters are on their way to Ugrath 3 as you receive this. They have been told to expect a traitor

to HappyFood Inc. and all that HappyFood stands for, and will react accordingly. I'm sure you're familiar with the stories told of the Armed Response teams. Perhaps you thought these teams were fictional. They are not.

After you have been removed, the HappyFood Franchise on Ugrath 3 will be shut down for several years to allow the damage you have done to repair itself. We only hope you have found your pathetic little rebellion to be worth all this havoc.

Peaceful surrender to the Armed Response team may possibly result in your survival, in which case extremely severe disciplinary treatments will be administered upon your return to Head Office. Frankly, we here at Head Office are hoping you do not give up quietly: all of us will enjoy watching the vid records afterwards.

Healthy, hearty, happy eating to you...

EndTrans

TRANS frm HappyFood Franchise 2232575 / ***Commander Divot***

Armed Response

Troubleshooters Unit

RECEV stn HappyFood INCORPORATED / ***Administrative Division***

Commander Divot reporting:

As ordered, I brought Unit 5B down on Ugrath 3, with full armament distributed to troubleshooter personnel. We approached HappyFood Franchise #2232575 with caution, as per your instructions. However, upon entering the establishment, we were unable to locate any activity of the treasonous nature you specify in your last message. In fact, HappyFood Franchise #2232575 is undoubtedly the finest Franchise either myself or my men have had the pleasure to dine in.

Obviously, some sort of bureaucratic or computer error is involved here. Possibly it involves the farwave transmitter of the Franchise Manager, one Mr. Nogren: the device has malfunctioned in some way. Perhaps he was merely unable to get his reports through to Head Office due to this mechanical problem. The techs on my team were able to fix the transmitter, however, so you should be getting a report from him any time now.

The quality of the Franchise's service and food here is exceptional! Last night we dined on a seven-course meal featuring native Ugrathan Kik-fish (similiar though superior to HappyLobster) and various wonderful vegetable dishes that showcased the fine berries and fruits of Ugrath 3. Mr. Nogren informs me that the principles behind his renovation of this Franchise are applicable in any Franchise in the galaxy, and we assisted him in sending full documentation and video reports of his establishment to the galactic net, where it can be accessed by Franchise

owners everywhere. Of course, this was only a short time ago, but already the response from other Franchises has been phenomenal!

My team has persuaded me that it would be best to remain here on Ugrath 3 until the mistake in our original mission orders has been clarified. Hopefully you will be able to locate the error and determine the actual location of this treasonous Franchise you warned us about so thoroughly. In the meantime, I suspect my men are anxious to sample more of Franchise #2232575's remarkable cuisine.

In fact, I admit I too am tempted by Mr. Nogren's description of tonight's meal: Raga-fish stew with broiled jubes (much like HappyLeeks-- though I feel that jubes have a more piquant, enticing flavor) and side dishes of various sweetmeats. I am certain that once word of Mr. Nogren's innovations spreads, we will be able to enjoy meals of this quality on every planet in the galaxy. Surely a promotion is in order for Mr. Nogren!

We await your response eagerly.

Healthy, hearty, and happy eating to you!

EndTrans

End Report

The Oculists

Like everyone, I've looked through a blue quartz lens to see the invisible angels that infest the skies over the City. Like everyone I've shot my limit, and now a dozen dark-eyed cherub-heads grace the walls of my den. Like everyone I've used a monocle of violet film to examine the foibles of my friends and colleagues, which become visible as multicolored bladders of light, and I've noted certain telltale black blooms in the aura I saw in my bathroom mirror... And of course from time to time I've toyed with the more exotic, the more frightening instruments of vision. But then, who hasn't?

I remember the *lorgnette* Armati made, little more than a toy to look at it, which revealed terrifying scenes of my own death. When I stopped driving to avoid

the auto crash I had seen, the *lorgnette* then showed me drowning at sea. When I took up swimming lessons the scene changed to one of me dying in bed of cancer, and now I smoke more than ever, since at least I know what to expect. And there were the chromium eyeglasses that Maingault built, which unveiled the secret creatures that live amongst us, all palps, fronds and feelers. They masquerade themselves as trees, chairs, plates, desks, and even food, and though I used these glasses only once, even now I have the occasional twinge when I think what I might really be sitting on, or eating. And in a small windowless room at the Conservatory there is an ornately-instrumented telescope of amber, through which one can see the future...

Common enough stories, true. Still, it was only a short time ago that things were different. The future is visible but the past dwindles quickly these days. Since there may remain somewhere the odd pedant interested in history and such, I now set down my account of how things came to pass.

It begins and ends of course with the oculists, with Armati and Maingault, our twin Gods, or Devils, of vision. Where and when they started out is beyond my memory, but they were soon known as the two finest designers of optics in the world. How their rivalry began is another mystery, but scarcely a pressing one, for everyone recognizes their mutual enmity as the hatred which only and always exists between great artists.

For years they waged intellectual war across the pages of specialized trade journals. At last, for unknown reasons, the two relocated simultaneously to our great

City, and their conflict could no longer be so easily contained. This was but a decade ago.

In defiance of all genealogical data, Salvatore Armati claimed descent from one Armato degli Armati, the thirteenth-century glassblower credited by some with the invention of spectacles. In spirit at least it was true, for the latter-day Armati was as much a hoaxer and charlatan as his namesake. Salvatore was a tall, brutally elegant man, not so much dark in complexion as smoky, who was given to startling statements and rude pranks. "The democratization of vision does not interest me," he said once, "for eyesight is wasted on the blind." A related story, told by Armati himself, concerned an American film star who commissioned a set of Salvatore's anachronistic eyepieces. The star received spectacles fashioned in the ancient Chinese style--crude crystal lenses that were tied to the head by strings. The glasses, the story goes, were warped so that the star's vision gradually worsened until he was unable to go into public without these devices, which had of course swiftly gone from a novelty to an embarrassment.

Alain Maingault was somewhat stiff when compared to his flamboyant counterpart. While Armati was, or claimed to be, self-taught, Maingault was a graduate of the prestigious *Ecole D'Optiques* in Paris. While Salvatore favored a black tuxedo with a blood-red kerchief, Alain draped his thick, stumpy frame with utilitarian smocks and, when necessary, business suits of rough-cut grey. He held conservative beliefs on both oculism and personal matters, favoring Francis Bacon as the inventor of spectacles and remaining faithfully devoted to his wife of some twenty

years, Susanne. And yet there was something unnerving about Maingault, who seemed a still well of unplumbable thought. He spoke little, but when he did everyone else felt foolishly loquacious; his optical works lacked the spectacular quality of Armati's, but possessed an almost hurtful clarity. In one of his rare comments on the ocular art, Alain said, "The science fails to achieve its true greatness because it concentrates on the correction of defects in vision. This should scarcely be our *aim*... any more than a poet should aim for the minimization of grammatical errors."

The two oculists set up shop in the City: Armati, in a broke-down shack in the stylish bohemian quarters, Maingault in a mirrored skyscraper downtown. Followers of their art were granted ample opportunity to examine their wares. A brief survey of Armati's goods revealed *pince-nez* of bone and quartz, temple-specs in steel and glass, spy-scopes and monocles tinted in phantasmagoric shades. Looking through Maingault's works one found laser-cut eyeglasses in wire rim, carefully bevelled bifocals, invisible contact lenses, and interchangeable frames of ingenious design.

Their arrival kicked up the expected storm of media attention, and for a time there was little to be heard in the coffeehouses of the City other than talk of Armati and Maingault. A New Surrealist painter taking his lunch at Chez Neon might withdraw from his pocket a stylish monocle he had just purchased from Armati, and demonstrate to his companion the unusual visual effects produced by its tinted lens. His companion would perhaps nod appreciatively at the novelty, then mention the eyeglasses he himself had just recently obtained from Maingault. Where are they then? the painter would ask. Why, I'm wearing them, the painter's companion would

say, to the consternation of his friend, who had not until just then noticed the glasses, so finely did the spectacles match the structure of face and skull.

Armati made a point of slandering Maingault during his frequent appearances at parties and functions, which his competitor avoided due to his wife's fragile constitution. "Maingault?" Salvatore might say. "I have nothing but admiration for him. He is a model for deformed dwarves everywhere." Amidst laughter Armati would don his latest creation, a pair of smoked sunglasses after the Sung Dynasty fashion, perhaps, and smile.

Maingault was less voluble with his commentary, but on the occasions an anxious reporter managed to extract from him some statement on his rival, it was inevitably cutting. "True, I am less concerned with cosmetics and colored glass than certain others in this field. All I can offer is improved and optimized vision, which devotees of fashion, who enjoy bumping their noses against lamp-posts, find of doubtful value."

Now Maingault was the darling of the City; now again the tide turned and it was Armati who was celebrated in the streets and cafes. It was at this time that Maingault found himself so beleaguered by the media that he was forced to take on an assistant. Amid swarms of applicants, Alain at last chose me. I was an optometrist by trade, but I immediately sold my small shop when the opportunity to work with one of my two idols presented itself. My greatest fear was that I might shatter the prototype of some finely-worked lens through clumsiness. I stayed with Maingault in

this position for many years, and hence became privy to many secrets and astonishments.

In hindsight it was inevitable the competition between the oculists would escalate. With the City in a furor over Armati's latest--holographic spectacles that imitated the blinking of pale reptile eyes--Maingault retreated into his private labs and was not heard from for months. He left me to deal with the day to day mechanics of his business, communicating only in terse memos. Armati offered the suggestion that perhaps the hectic pace of life in an urban metropolis did not agree with his rival's delicate sensibilities.

This was not the case, though for a time the public believed that Maingault had retired, worn down by the pressure of the competition. I heard the whir of the machines in his lab and knew differently. But when at last Alain surfaced with a new work, I, like everyone else, heard of it only indirectly.

Jazz musician Moly Dunbar, on the recommendation of a friend, had visited Maingault's clinic to be fitted for new glasses, which Alain delivered in person. That evening when Dunbar appeared at the Ophelium his playing amazed both the audience and his bandmates. His fellow musicians listened in disbelief, then with awe, as Moly passed around his new glasses, through which the musical notes themselves became visible as colored vapors: red, blue, turquoise, aquamarine, tangerine-black.

Amidst the roar of public astonishment which followed, Maingault remained a quiet center. "There are spectrums of sound as well as light," he offered by way of

explanation. "They are related more closely than many believe, that's all. There is no magic or trickery here."

Now it was Armati's turn to disappear from view, while the City went mad over Maingault's new spectacles. Some believed he had retreated in shame, but most suspected there would be more heard from Salvatore, and they were not disappointed.

A month later Armati announced he would be displaying new spectacles to the public. All were invited to attend, "Except," he noted, "those with weak hearts, timid nerves, or over-vivid imaginations."

If there were many who possessed these faults, they did not admit to them, for the opening was attended by vast crowds that stopped traffic around Armati's store for blocks.

Inside the store was a riotous cross-section of the City's high society, drinking and laughing and peering at the spectacles set just out of reach in a transparent box. They were thick, heavy-looking, with dead black oily lenses. At five minutes past the appointed hour Armati appeared, resplendent in his trademark tuxedo, and singled out the mayor as the first to try his new device.

"Your heart is in good shape? Your imagination, I trust, is not exceptionally colorful? No, I would think not. Here, then." With no further ceremony Armati handed the glasses to the mayor. The mayor chuckled nervously, glanced about at the expectant crowd, and placed the spectacles atop his nose.

There was quiet as the man stood peering this way and that through the oily lenses. At last his gaze fixed on something invisible to the rest of the assembly and

his jaw slackened. He dropped slowly to his knees without turning his head, and said, in a voice thick with emotion:

"Mother... but... you've been dead all these years..."

The silence deepened, and for a moment it was unclear whether the crowd would laugh, scream, or simply jeer. And then, like a crashing wave, the assembled *hoi polloi* clamored forward, all shouting to be next. Armati smiled and retreated, leaving an inobtrusive group of security guards to cover his exit.

It would do little good to describe the commotion Armati's 'ghost-glasses' caused to an audience now drunk with such wonders. The demand was very great. Most people ordered the 'Basic' model, which permitted the viewing of deceased members of one's immediate family. Some opted for the more expensive 'Deluxe' glasses, which called up the shades of your entire genealogical line. A few tycoons even commissioned Armati's 'Prestige'-class spectacles--bulky, binocular-like devices which made visible any and every dead soul whatsoever, frozen in the position of death: mangled bodies hovering over the roadway, hospitals filled with horizontal corpses at bed-level, flailing limbs protruding from the walls or floors of buildings. I remember that I could only afford the 'Basic' model, through which I saw a very old man in coveralls who gestured violently and moved his lips as if shouting something. When I checked an old family album I recognized the man as my grandfather, who had died when I was three. I never was able to make out what he was trying to tell me.

"A foolish toy," was all Maingault would say of Armati's 'ghost-glasses.' He cloistered himself once again, and had me convey his thoughts to the press. "Mr. Maingault is busy for now," I said. "He wishes me to say that he is working on an optical device which will be of infinitely greater power than the trick lenses now enjoying their vogue."

Several weeks later Maingault unveiled his creation without fanfare. They were glasses which showed wearers a vision of their future progeny, as an infant, a child, or a full-grown adult, depending on the thickness of the lens; these glasses too came in several models of increasing price. "In terms of utility these are obviously somewhat superior to Armati's," Alain said. "What use is there in watching a dead cousin frolic and caper? Most people have had their fill of *living* relatives. On the other hand, with my lenses prospective parents may make informed, and if necessary preventative decisions." The glasses caused concern to some who saw only a blank grey when they looked through them, which Maingault regretfully explained meant they were infertile or impotent, and a few very old citizens reported anomalous visions of frogs or rodents. But on the whole the spectacles were of course a massive success.

Armati responded shortly with what he called the most powerful lenses ever invented. "They allow one to see not only what exists, which is inevitably drab, but what *could* exist, in any number of alternative realities, which offer a bewildering array of sensual impressions." Oddly, Armati marketed the lens in a tiny spy-scope. His decision became understandable once experimentation with the item revealed that

the "alternative realities" the lens presented when aimed at a person were often erotic in nature.

Armati snorted at criticism. "The sensual nature of humanity is repressed in this world. The prudish may avoid looking at beautiful persons of the opposite sex if they so choose." To which he added: "As for hazards, the only one I can imagine is the revulsion that might overcome you if you were to aim my scope at certain short, ugly, French lens-grinders."

Maingault said nothing to this. A short time later, however, he issued a polite invitation to his enemy.

Mr. Armati:

You have expressed an interest in powerful optical devices, and have even constructed a few makeshift toys of this nature yourself. Therefore you are invited to my store tomorrow evening, where you may see and try for yourself the single most powerful lens yet invented.

Armati did indeed arrive at Maingault's establishment the following evening, along with a gang of his nihilistic bohemian "friends"... some said lovers. I greeted them and asked them to make themselves comfortable while Maingault prepared himself.

Once inside, Salvatore and his companions took the opportunity to examine and sneer at the various glasses on display. One fop noted a pair of spectacles sitting alone on a small pedestal.

"Please, sir," I said in sudden anxiety, "do not touch those. They are, I am told, the most powerful lenses in the world, and we should wait for Alain before examining them further."

Armati, hearing this, turned his attention to the glasses. They were awkward things, with inch-thick lenses which made one dizzy just to glance at them. Armati looked as though he already had a number of hilarious comments ready, but matters were taken out of his hands and mine when one of his companions seized the spectacles and, making foolish gestures, put them on. His eyes goggled behind the massive lenses. "See! Look! Now I am all-seeing! Now I--"

Abruptly the babbling stopped. "Ah, the time, the *distance*," the fop whispered. He removed the glasses and put them down. Straightening, he executed a strange twitching jig to the astonishment of us all, cried something that sounded like, "Corpselight! Corpselight!" and collapsed to the floor. A brief examination indicated that he was dead.

An enraged Armati tried to press charges, but the authorities were stymied, primarily because no one wanted to try the glasses on to verify their effect. Maingault maintained an icy innocence. "I made no advertisements as to the safety of the glasses. I claimed only to have created the most powerful lenses known to humankind, and this I did."

No one denied Maingault's achievement, but it became obvious the public was not ready for visual instruments of such raw force. Yet the demand for new optics did not diminish, and the feud between the two oculists was of course only intensified by

this incident. Now Armati referred to Maingault as "the French murderer" whenever he spoke of him, and Maingault refused to discuss Armati even indirectly.

A few weeks later Armati released a clever optical contraption which, through manipulation of various slides and buttons, could see around corners, inside boxes, and through walls. Shortly thereafter Maingault revealed a new visor which tremendously enhanced the accuracy of vision; a construction worker avoided death when the device revealed the vibrations of a beam about to fall on him, a professor claimed he could tell what his students were about to say next by the oscillations of their throats, and various scholars testified that they could read ancient Hebrew or Latin as clear simple English through these glasses. Armati countered with contact lenses of fourteen different colors, which stimulated as many different states of ecstasy, and which, furthermore, he claimed could produce emotions heretofore unknown to man if lenses of different hues were worn simultaneously...

The City was in continual astonishment. Work stopped, buses no longer ran on time, radio and television broadcasts became erratic. No one cared. In my capacity as media liasion for Maingault I no longer had to answer the question, *How does it work?* Now I fended off countless cries of, *When is the next one coming?*

The extrahuman effort of creation, however, took its toll on the two craftsmen. Maingault hid in his laboratory and would only accept food that could fit under the door or through the mail slot. Often I saw his wife Susanne begging by the entrance for him to come out and rest, but each time she was rebuffed, and she left seeming even more sickly and pale than usual. Armati continued to make his rounds of parties

and nightclubs, but it seemed a trial for him now: grey flesh rimmed his eyes, his witticisms and drolleries were forced, and his smile was a ghastly thing.

The City discovered the angels that fluttered far above through a pair of Armati's glasses. Amidst humanitarian concerns the bylaw-makers compromised and limited the hunting quota to twelve per year. On the heels of this came Maingault's monocle that revealed emotions and psychoses as fiery spheres of light. There was a great deal of speculation as to what certain shades and shapes meant, with many claiming they sported not a dark bladder of latent homicidal mania but rather an indigo globe of creative talent... and so on and so forth.

How could it continue? We were gorged on miracles. A dim suspicion ran through the City that something somewhere had to give. When it did it came as no surprise, but the snapped link was neither Armati nor Maingault, nor even the public, whose thirst for wonder was insatiable, but Susanne, Maingault's pale neglected wife.

Her sudden illness was terminal in nature. It was of a sort not amenable to medical intervention, though I know little more. The panicked doctors could do nothing other than dull her pain with drugs. It is a measure of Maingault's distraction that he was perhaps the last in the City to hear the news. When at last I worked up the nerve to tell him, he nodded and went back to his lens-grinding machines as though it were no more than a bit of trivia, but ten minutes later I found him crashing through his showroom as if blind, knocking priceless optics to the floor with nonchalant sweeps of his hand.

After a few days of desperate visits to the hospital and vain entreaties to foreign specialists, Maingault sent word to Armati that he wished to meet in private. I know this because Armati arrived at Maingault's office late one night when, by chance, I was at work in a back room. I heard their voices in the foyer.

Padding from my room to gain a better perspective, I was unable at first to make out the oculists' words. But Armati's voice lacked its characteristic bluster, and Maingault spoke in fitful, anxious bursts. Peering through a small window, I saw the two conversing, apparently without rancor. Then I beheld a shocking sight: Armati and Maingault embraced each other like brothers.

Armati's next words left no doubt concerning the subject of their conversation. "I will retire as well," he said. "I think the City has had its fill of oculism, and perhaps more than that. I realize now that I too have... neglected certain things."

"I only wish to spend what time remains with Susanne," Maingault said quietly.

Armati blinked and looked away into space. "I was working on a very special pair of spectacles," he said at last in a soft dull voice. "They could be helpful to your wife, so, I will finish them. The lenses afford a view into the higher worlds, where imperfections do not exist and all is ideal... they may ease her pain, or at least her perception of it."

Alain stared. He turned away and stood in silence for several moments. I saw his shoulders quaking. "Thank you, Salvatore," he choked. "I'm sorry for so many things--"

"No," Armati interrupted. "I hate apologies, and most of all I hate making my own... I must go. Farewell."

Without further comment Armati turned and departed, and I hastily retreated to my office. I was deeply shaken. The oculists' truce was terrible news for me.

For years now I had lived to examine each new lens. Each time I thought I was beginning to understand, Armati or Maingault would create something that tore the foundations of the science down and built them anew. There was already enough to keep me occupied in my studies for the rest of my life, but I felt the oculists were on the verge of something truly great, something unimaginable. To see it all slip away now... it was a great tragedy.

A few days later Armati called on me. The oculists still had not released the news of their retirement to the public. "Here," Armati said, handing me a box, "take this to Maingault."

The box of course contained the spectacles Armati had promised Susanne, which I could not help but examine once I had brought them back to my office. They were elegant, gilt-edged glasses with lenses of swimming orange. With some trepidation I tried them on, and spent the next half hour staring at the pens on my desk, which at first appeared to be jeweled rods, and then lines of light, and then something altogether more dazzling... At last I took the spectacles off and sighed. Examining the device more closely, I realized how astounding the craftsmanship was: the effect depended as much on the tilt and alignment of the lenses as it did on their material qualities. I wondered what one might see if the lenses were re-aligned.

There is very little more to tell in Armati and Maingault's story. I passed the spectacles on to Maingault, who brought them to his wife in her hospital room. Other witnesses say that Alain spoke to her when she appeared sensible, professing his love for her and telling her of his retirement. She is said to have smiled. At last Alain brought out Armati's glasses and put them in place over her eyes.

A long sigh escaped her as she stared up at the ceiling. Maingault, crying quietly, stood up and went to the door. Her screams reached him as he made his way down the hallway. By the time he returned, snatching the glasses and smashing them to the floor, Susanne was dead, her face contorted in what some later described as an access of horror beyond human imagination.

An hour later Armati was surprised in his shop by Maingault, who leapt for him with a knife, missing the throat but leaving a long horizontal slash across Salvatore's face which would never fully heal. Bystanders separated the two before murder could be committed, but threats and curses filled the room.

Nothing could bring peace between the two men now. Maingault railed on about Armati's treachery to anyone who would listen. Armati, many years later, confided to me his belief that Maingault had killed his own wife for unknown reasons. "I know very well what my glasses were capable of doing. It would have taken deliberate sabotage to produce that effect."

Of course neither retired. They took up their duel where it left off and they have not resolved it yet. What demonic energy drives them is unknown, but it is the City's gain, for each day, it seems, a fresh miracle arrives at our door. Like everyone

I see the world anew every morning through layers of these astonishing optics, and my days are an exhilaration of hilarity and startlement.

I am done with this account. The oculists have ushered in a grand new era for humanity. At times I wonder what might have happened had certain events occurred, or not occurred, but this is all pointless speculation. What is the happiness of one, or two, or three people compared to our universal joy?

And so surely my long strange nights of fear and guilt are a small enough price to pay. Surely that one act of mine has been balanced by the glory of these present days, and the days to come. In a small windowless room at the Conservatory there is an ornately-instrumented telescope of amber, through which one may see the future--I do not know if it was Armati who built it, or Maingault. I have spent many hours peering through this device, though, and it eases my soul to say now that there is no apocalypse; there is no stale utopia. There is only a rich, violent tapestry of love and terror, which will not end, which will not fade, which will go on, and on, I know, for ever.

The Gastronomer

Sineux looked at the diamond-back terrapin on his plate and sighed. Overanxious waiters moved in, but veered away at his savage glance. He was pondering his future in the rather specialized field of gastronomic espionage.

Of course Taillevent's suicide could not be directly linked to him. It had been a mere hundred-thousand-dollar commission, and all he had done was write a brief review for the *Times*. "Perhaps Taillevent has been too long in America, for the shad, I suspect, has been taken from the James River, not the Connecticut, and is a trifle soft in texture. Still, I think it fair to say that Taillevent is now at the peak of his powers... Despite this and other problems the meal on the whole could be said to be satisfactory."

Sineux had no reason to worry, and yet... what force of will had allowed Taillevent to keep his head submerged in the pot of boiling water? Had escaping steam instantly blown his braincase open, like a lobster's?

A sound moved him from his bleak reverie, and he looked up to see someone crossing the candle-gloom towards his table. This then would be his prospective employer. As the man seated himself Sineux took a grim approximation of him: unpleasant-looking, lean, his muscles not filled out with fat. American indeed, by the style of his dress, and vigorous, with a nasty Teutonic efficiency about him. Obviously neither gourmet nor yet even a gourmand, he would likely eat with Napoleonic snaps and gulps: a sad case, yet restaurateurs in this age were often so.

Still, the American had money, as the handsome retainer Sineux had already received for this meeting demonstrated. And Sineux's daylight work as gourmet and critic was becoming less remunerative every year. Perhaps it was only his tastes which had grown more extravagant, but it was all the same cold dish when it came to dining. He knew not one gourmet of quality who could sustain his lifestyle without resorting to some kind of shadowy employment. There were those who wrote biased reviews for money, like himself; others infiltrated kitchens to taint or overspice foodstuffs; he knew one fellow who had made a lucrative business from his ability to vomit at will. And so as the American prepared himself to speak Sineux rolled his luxurious bulk back into the chair and forced a smile.

"I can fuck Paradisio over anytime I want to," the man said.

Sineux's grin wavered. "Er--"

"But that," the American continued flatly, "is not the *point*."

"I'm afraid you have me at a loss," Sineux said nervously. "You are--?"

"Brock. Lou Brock. Now I don't necessarily mean bombs and arson and whatever, but if that's what it takes... I could raze the place. But that's not the *point*."

Obviously not. The name sounded familiar, but Sineux could not quite place it. And what was this about Paradisio? What could this crass American have to do with that? Paradisio, a seventeenth-century re-creation in Montserrat, was one of the few restaurants that had survived deification in the press with its real reputation intact, and it was known to a certain crowd as the single best place in the world to eat... though Sineux had his own ideas about that.

He could see where this was leading, however. "And you wish Paradisio ruined," he said smoothly. "You want their customers to flock to your establishment instead, correct? I must warn you, Mr.Brock, that what you ask is not easy, and will be exceedingly expensive. I will have to--"

"Whatever it takes. Two million. Four. Whatever."

Sineux blinked twice. He looked down at his plate. The terrapin, he noticed, had not been prepared in the Philadelphian style, with eggs and cream, but rather in the Baltimore fashion, as a black Madeira stew. Moreover he suspected the small eggs served alongside it were those of a *bourgeois* turtle, not a genuine terrapin. He reached for his wineglass, sipped, looked again to the American.

"I see, then, Mr.Brock. I believe we can strike a deal, as you say over here. I'm afraid I'm unsure what restaurant you're representing. Have you bought out *Tour d'Argent*? Or perhaps *Restaurant la Reserve*?"

Brock smiled, but his eyes didn't flash--if anything went darker and deader. "None of those," he said. "I thought you knew--I'm the president of HappyFood Inc. I own the MegaBurger franchises."

Sineux's palate went numb for a moment, hyperacidity clenched his heart. He forked an egg and chewed it slowly. Definitely a mere turtle. He supposed this was the moment he should have been having a crisis of conscience.

"Eight million," he said when he was able.

"Done," said Brock.

The next evening Sineux staged a piquant farewell party for himself in the hotel where he was staying. A liberal spreading of Brock's money had ensured that a grotesquely expensive privately catered meal waited there for him.

He ate slowly, as taste is the most demanding of the senses. While one may hear and appreciate two or more sounds at once, flavours are more jealous, demanding sole attention. Yet aftertastes, bouquets, and fragrances may linger, iike chords well struck, doubling and redoubling later pleasures, in a series of combinations whose number are imperfectly known, even to him.

A vast array of gastronomical pleasures lay before his tearful eyes. Capons from Bresse, round as an apple, rare even in Paris: he lifted his fork and gently bade farewell to *les poulardes fines*.

A dish of eels with crayfish sauce, strongly spiced: "Adieu, adieu... adieu!"

A whole pheasant, plucked at the optimum time just as it began to decompose, stuffed with steamed beef marrow, scraped bacon, pepper, salt, herbs, and truffles, served on fat-drenched toast and surrounded by bitter oranges, and washed down with the best wine of Upper Burgundy: "Au revoir," Sineux wept.

And old Escoffier's favorite, the Wagnerian *peches Melba*--poached peaches on a bed of vanilla ice cream, set in a swan of ice, crowned with raspberry sauce: "Goodbye... goodbye," he whispered.

"Now, my friends, I must take my leave of you all. I pray you wish me Godspeed, and a safe return."

In literal terms, he had not far to go--there was a MegaBurger just down the street. But he feared the journey would take him much farther than that. He felt as if he were betraying someone. But who? The meal he'd just consumed had cost well over a thousand dollars to assemble, and now that he thought about it hadn't been that good after all. The eel was slightly overdone, the pheasant lacked the grainy texture needed for perfection, and the *peches Melba* may well have been fried rather than poached.

No, he had nothing to be loyal to.

Still he hesitated before getting out of the taxi. He'd seen MegaBurgers before, of course, from a distance, but this was rather different. It was a bit like expecting a reading of the *Inferno* to sooth the nerves as you knocked at the gates of Hell.

From the outside it looked bad, Sineux had to admit. The purple and yellow plastic, the neon, the stunned suburbanites circling like moths: these were not good omens. He tried to comfort himself by thinking how absolutely *safe* the food inside was, safer really than his own diet, which included an annual puffer-fish banquet in Japan and various exotic raw meats. With millions of customers Brock could not afford even a single case of food poisoning: everything was cooked grey and pumped with preservatives. He made his way to the entrance.

Once inside Sineux' attention snagged on a plastic tray atop a garbage bin. On the tray were various... various half-eaten *food items*. Though the scattered wrappers suggested that here lay a Choco-Chew, a MegaFurter, a Suck-Em-Back and a Pork Pocket, Sineux was hard-pressed to tell which was which. He tasted the first delicate twinges of bile at the back of his throat.

Swaying to his left he saw a washroom. That was what he needed--a splash of cold water in the face, a brief respite from the odor which his olfactory nerves were trying, unsuccessfully, to disbelieve. He pushed the door open and stumbled in.

Of course the washroom was a very bad idea, or so it seemed at first, while he was retching. But when the last of last night's eel and pheasant had been flushed away, save for a few splashes here and there, Sineux looked in the mirror and felt better. He looked like an average customer now. All that business with the toilet had

been for the best, really--now he was clear of the last remnants of his normal diet and could begin the project in earnest.

He felt *hungry* now, to his considerable surprise. Was this, then, the turning point? Would it all be easy from here on?

"Give me," Sineux said to the well-pockmarked clerk, "five of everything."

He needed to catch up on a lifetime of fast food if he was to succeed in his project. Besides, he couldn't tell for the life of him what any of the *food item* names might represent. With three trays stacked at his table, he began to learn.

A Pork Pocket was a fleshy envelope of dough filled with, as near as he could tell, liquified ham. He ate two.

Choco-Chews were gummy bars sprayed with a reasonable imitation of chocolate. Though evidently intended as dessert, the dining protocol here seemed lax, and he ate four before continuing.

The Juicy One was a basic cheeseburger: a cuboid slab of greymeat, cheese food product, faux-sesame-seed buns, and unnaturally green pickles. He ate one and moved on to more interesting fare.

The Suck-Em-Back was intriguing. The slogans on the package asked: "Is it DINNER? Is it DESSERT? Or just plain DELICIOUS!!!" What it was, Sineux found, was a plastic squeeze tube filled with flavored gelatin and leftovers from the franchise's other meat products. As he clenched and reclenched the tube he tasted beef, pork, chicken, fish, and something which in texture resembled the Himalayan

musk oxen, though almost certainly the comparison was inapt. Despite the novelty and surprise factor he finished only two tubes before becoming restless.

He hesitated briefly when he opened a styrofoam bowl to discover steaming diarrhea. Of course it was the Mother o' Chunks Stew Special, which he found, if you ignored the odor, texture, color and flavour, to be a not totally unsuccessful facsimile.

He sat back and released a loud wet belch. This was going rather well, and confirmed his belief in his own talent: a *gourmet* could not eat these things, no; Brillat-Savarin would have slashed his own wrists first. But what did that represent save overweening pride? His own gastronomic skills were more flexible. No gourmet he, rather a... a gastronomer. Yes.

And now, he thought as he slurped on his milkshake, on to Paradisio.

His flight was not till later in the evening. On a whim he phoned Brock.

"Why Paradisio?"

There was silence for a moment. Then Brock said, slowly, "I used to work there."

Sineux didn't laugh. It was too patently ridiculous to be untrue.

"And what happened?"

There was another long pause, and Sineux thought Brock had hung up. Then he spoke again, in a dry voice Sineux couldn't interpret.

"There was a conflict."

"Of what sort?"

"Now then," Brock drawled, "that doesn't really concern you, does it. Does it *concern* you, Mr. Sineux?"

Sineux realized: it did not.

"All you need to know is this. I want every last fat fucking high-society bitch and fuckhead eating Choco-Chews and MegaFurters within a week. And--are you listening?"

"Hmm? Yes."

"And *enjoying* it, Sineux. Enjoying it."

Paradisio was an elaborately reconstructed seventeenth-century chalet located high on a mountainside, accessible only by helicopter and privately-owned gondola, though the odd mountain climber had gained the peak to discover a tremendous surprise. It was small, dismally dark, and prohibitively expensive, but of course that was part of its charm. Its clientele, unsurprisingly, were both wealthy and well-bred. More than one *nouveau-riche* computer magnate had been turned away at the door, ostensibly for minute dress violations, in reality for a more subtle transgression against the mood entire.

In a deliberate archaism dinners were served *a la francaise* instead of *a la russe*, as was the modern trend: a table-straining variety of dishes were set out all at once, rather than consecutively, so as to make as great a show of luxury as possible. The anachronisms ran deeper than this, and roasts were done on a spit rather than in

an oven. Any guest impudent enough to display a pager or cellular phone was immediately escorted to the door and barred for life. The only evidence of the twentieth century visible inside was the pistol carried by the *maitre d'hotel* to deal with gross breaches of etiquette. Legend held that it had been fired three times in Paradisio's history, twice into the floor.

The waiting list for Paradisio was several years long, and every night there was a tuxedoed riot by the gondola, as various unscheduled patrons tried to determine if any scheduled guests had died, or otherwise been maimed in such a way as to preclude their attending dinner. Sineux, on the other hand, found it was not so difficult to arrange a table for that evening; as he'd expected, it merely required connections, reputation, threats, and a vast sum of money.

As he stepped out of the helicopter onto Paradisio's landing pad he saw a conglomeration of tuxedoes and gowns milling by the chalet's entrance. Good: he wanted it to be crowded tonight.

He walked past the line, nodding to the doorman, and proceeded to his table in the center of the dining room, where a waiter instantly appeared with a bottle of his preferred wine. Of course this was not standard procedure. Other diners were treated to the unique protocols Paradisio had employed for years. First, they were kept waiting at the door for half an hour before the maitre d' contemptuously swept them to their table. Next, they would wait another hour, perhaps, before a waiter might sidle up to experiment with various languages specifically selected for their incomprehensibility to even the best-travelled customer--Swahili, perhaps; Sanskrit, if

necessary. After the requisite frustration and humiliation were inflicted, the long wait began in earnest: the diners might have up to three hours before a horde of white-jacketed waiters exploded luminescently into the dimness of the chamber, carts piled high with plates, trays, and dishes.

Sineux sipped his wine and watched the door by the light of the three chandeliers. Two by two the diners entered; one couple raised their voices and were quietly escorted out. At last all were seated.

After an hour Sineux noticed whisperings and furtive nods in his direction, and finally a grotesquely thin female--one would think it no harder to fatten women than poultry--approached his table.

"M'sieur Sineux... pardon my Francais... my husband and I are great admirers of yours. We follow your columns all the time. I was wondering..."

Sineux nodded, nodded, signed the offered datebook. Thus encouraged, a small crowd quickly formed about him. He smiled and chatted, smiled and chatted, and then they returned to their tables, glowing with their proximity to greatness.

Two hours, and Sineux knew the time was right. The diners, restless and hungry, knew they still had at least another hour to wait before they could even begin to hope for food.

He reached inside his voluminous suit jacket and with a great crackling noise withdrew a large paper bag with the MegaBurger logo on the side.

Conversation, already hushed and painful, sputtered into silence.

Without ceremony Sineux upended the bag's contents on the table: a panoply of styrofoam boxes and tissue-wrapped shapes. He carefully folded and flattened the bag and replaced it in his jacket. From the corner of his eye he could see the maitre d's face go drawn and white.

He picked up a Suck-Em-Back, tore open the top, inserted it in his mouth and inhaled greedily. The acoustics of Paradisio, as he had predicted, amplified the guzzling, snorkling sound quite beautifully.

Finishing, he quickly popped a few Fry Cakes into his mouth. A spurt of grease hit the table, and he casually mopped it up with his napkin.

He washed down the glutinous mass with a mighty slurp of his Banana Cream Shake. He wiped his lips and glanced around at the gallery of shocked faces. Color was returning to the maitre d's cheeks--a violent, angry purple.

Sineux turned back to his food. He lifted a Double-Decker Juicy One and bit into it with a muffled sigh. Two more loud sloppy bites and it was gone. He lolled back in his chair, chewed, swallowed; chewed, leaned forward, swallowed again; chewed, chewed, swallowed once more, and then released a single long wet mighty blasting belch. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and gasped contentedly.

"*Monsieur Sineux.*" He looked up into the livid face of the maitre d', who was controlling his fury through sheer teeth-clenching force of will. "Monsieur Sineux. Why are you doing this."

"What do you mean? I was just having a snack to tide me over."

"Monsieur Sineux. You--" The maitre d's jaw betrayed him, and his mouth snapped shut, facial muscles trembling with rage. He nodded briskly, then turned on his heel.

"Oh, there is one thing."

As the maitre d' looked back slowly, Sineux straightened his pants and stood up. "Now that I think about it, I'll have to cancel my dinner for tonight." He patted his stomach. "I'm afraid I'm full."

Sineux casually dropped his napkin to the table and strolled towards the exit. Behind him he heard panicked rustles and whispers. He glanced back as if idly to see a pair of confused diners standing up; then a second couple; then a third. He smiled to himself and continued on.

As he neared the exit he felt a sharp pressure in his lower back. "Monsieur," said the maitre d', pressing the pistol into his spine, "please step this way."

Sineux considered running for it. A poor idea. "Now then, what seems to be the--"

The maitre d' seized his arm and propelled him past an open door.

He was in a small white room. It looked like the employees' dressing area. The maitre d' closed the door, but not before Sineux heard the great double doors at the entrance of the chalet opening with a creak and a hurried rush of words.

"Sit."

Sineux did so, heart walloping.

"What--"

"Shut up."

A few minutes later another man came into the room. He was older, fifty perhaps, well-fleshed, with sorrowful eyes.

"I am the owner," he said.

Sineux said nothing.

The door opened again, and a waiter with a cart full of trays entered. He placed a single dish on the table in front of Sineux.

The owner lifted the cover. "Eat," he said.

Sineux's eyes rolled about, looking for escape. He tried to lift himself from the chair, but the nozzle of the pistol pressed against his head.

The owner gestured at the table again. "Eat."

It was a ragout of oysters, the smell of the gravy redolent with peppercorns. Sineux knew from personal experience how easy it is to introduce dangerous chemicals into such a brew. He started to protest and heard a clicking noise from the pistol, which pressed itself against his temple again.

"Please, can't we--"

"Eat."

With a barely suppressed sob, Sineux bent to dine.

When he was done he looked up at the owner, eyes wide and watering. "It's," he said, "it's very--*good*."

"Why, yes, it is. This was one of Louis Brock's specialties, when he worked for me. Louis was a very great cook, once."

"What," Sineux asked, "what happened?"

"Nothing unusual. He got too big for his britches." The owner smiled sadly and glanced down at the ragout. "It's not poisoned. You can go now."

Shakily Sineux got to his feet, and with a last glance at the maitre d's pistol, now at the man's side, fled the room. The dining chamber, he could see, was empty save for a few stunned waiters. As he ran from the chalet, lungs heaving, he heard the pistol fire once, then again.

Back in his hotel he ignored the phone when it rang, and unplugged it when it rang again. A few hours later an envelope was slipped under the door.

Good work. They're all here, eating like pigs.

The balance of the payment has been deposited in your account.

-B.

He folded the note carefully and dropped it in the trash. He sat down on a couch. After a while he plugged the phone in again and gave the desk clerk a long, explicit set of instructions, and then he unplugged it again.

Later there was a knock at his door. He let them in with the food and gave them several thousand dollars. When they were gone he seated himself at the table and lifted the cover from the platter. It was calves' liver, Venetian style, sliced paper thin: a simple dish that required much skill, and was perhaps his favorite in the broad family of Italian cuisine.

There was nothing more to do but dine. He sliced a delicate piece of liver and placed it on his tongue. After a moment he sliced another. He enfolded, turned, pressed it with his tongue; masticated, moved it to the back of his mouth, waited for it to dissolve, swallowed. Then he cut another. Then he cut another, and then another, and another, and then he was sobbing as he stuffed slice after slice into his mouth with both hands, weeping openly and hopelessly over his plate, for no matter how much he ate, no matter how hard he tried, no matter what he did, all he could taste was cheeseburger.

The Happy Dead Man

It was fall when the dead man came down the river. From time to time a playful current would spin or twirl him, but he took no notice, for he was dreaming wildly as he drifted down the river, past the October-colored riverbank trees. He had died during the happiest dream he had ever known and now he could not finish dreaming this dream, even though he was dead.

His dead eyes were wide open, and so his dream went up and out of him. When the river rolled him so he faced the sky the birds above were caught up in his happy dream and swooped down to cover him in a feathery carpet, pecking and snapping at the bloated flesh showing through his muddy clothes. When the river rolled him face down the cold fish rose to him in shoals and nibbled at his toes and

fingers. When he was face up, he dreamed of wheeling great giddy circles over the trees, and when he was face down he dreamed of gliding through the murk with powerful sweeps of his fins. Face up or face down, he had no preference, though at night on the river he enjoyed looking up to dream of the stars shining.

One dawn he passed by two fishermen on a dock. The river swung him over so he saw them briefly as he lolled past. He dreamed it would be good to be on the dock in the cold morning air with a fishing rod in his hand, and a family at home waiting to eat his fish with lemon and butter. It was a simple dream but it was happy. The two fishermen caught a ragged fringe of it as he swept past and stared out at the receding half-submerged shape, until one remembered suddenly he had to go back to work at the drill press on Monday, and the other nicked his hand on a hook and swore loudly in the morning air.

The orange sun burned down into the orange trees. The dead man travelled all night, and fish nibbled on his toes and fingers.

In the morning he became lodged in a tangle of dead trees in a slow shallow part of the river. His head stuck in the crook of a branch and he looked off to the shore. He heard the sounds of children shouting far away. After a while the children came onto the shore and he saw them shouting and pointing at him. He dreamt of being a child making a wonderful hideous discovery on a cool fall morning that would be a secret from all the grown-ups and that would make the end of the summer an orangey time to be whispered about round campfires by the river, and the children stopped shouting and just looked out at him. Two of them had started to wade out

into the river towards him when a drifting piece of wood knocked him free of the trees and into the current again. Behind him the children realized they would be in trouble when their parents found out they were down in the river, and besides they remembered they had to go back to school soon. They watched sadly as the dead man floated away down the river, dreaming of birds.

Later on in the day the dead man heard people talking among themselves up ahead on the riverbank. As he got closer, their conversation became more excited.

Someone snagged him with a pole and dragged him in to shore. He didn't mind.

There were three men standing over him. One of them leaned in, then made a face. "Phew! What a smell!"

The dead man saw that he was a policeman, and dreamed how good it would be to be a policeman standing over the mystery of a dead body on the riverbank, thinking sternly of murderers and evidence, and standing straight and tall with a hat and a badge and a belt and a gun.

"He must have been dead for a week, maybe two," another man said, looking closely at the dead man. The dead man saw he was a doctor and dreamed a dream of a happy doctor who knew all there was to know about living and dying and who could nod wisely at all times, even the sad times, because he knew all these things, and it was a good dream and the doctor became quiet and stood with the policeman staring thoughtfully down at the dead man.

"All I know is I don't want this thing rotting away on my property for another week," the third man said, and the dead man saw that he was a simple farmer and he dreamed a simple dream, of the simple life of a man who would disdain the judgement of the policeman and the learning of the doctor in favor of the wet dew on the grass in the morning and the hearty bark of his big dog, and the third man stepped back with the other two and looked down at the dead man with them for a long time. The policeman forgot that he was doing what he had long ago said he would never do, spending his life growing old in a boring posting in a small town where nothing ever happened, the doctor forgot that he thought his wife was going to leave him to live with a much younger man who was also a doctor, and the farmer forgot that he lived alone and his children and wife who had moved away had not written or phoned him in over two years.

The morning passed. The dead man did not mind dreaming his dreams of these three men and the three men did not mind either.

Finally a voice from up the riverbank shouted something, and the three men jerked about blinking.

"Hmf, ah," the policeman said.

"Ah, yes, we should..." the doctor trailed off.

"Get this thing outa here," muttered the farmer.

They called out to the unseen shouter up on the riverbank, then they went away. The dead man stared up and dreamed of the clear noon sky. After a while the three men came back. Wincing and grunting, they put him into a bag. They picked up

the bag and the dead man felt himself being hefted and swung up the trail from the shore. He could see nothing but blackness but he dreamed of that and he was happy.

He was loaded into a vehicle, which started to move. From inside his bag the dead man could hear the policeman and doctor talking in the front seat, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. From the sounds of other cars and people outside, he knew they were driving into town, and he wished mildly that he could see it so he could dream about it. He dreamed about it anyway.

The car stopped and the dead man was lifted in his bag again. He felt himself being carried into a building. He was put down on something hard and then the bag was unzipped.

He was on a cold table in a cold room. The policeman and doctor were looking down at him again. He looked up at them and dreamed for them again and they stared at him for a long time. They were happy. At last there was a beeping from the doctor's belt and they blinked and turned away from him. There was a hard cold light over the dead man's head and he began to dream of being a star in a distant reach of a spiral-arm nebula and so he missed the hurried conversation between the policeman and the doctor, though in a distracted way he noticed when they left the room and closed the door with an echoing boom.

He stayed in the cold room looking up from the cold table at the cold light for a long time. There was only the sound of water dripping from his body to the table to the floor. In a way he missed the nibbling of the fish, but it was good to be here too. His dream was happy and showed no signs of ending.

He was distracted from his dream some time later when the door opened and two people came in. Far away he heard the doctor talking. "...trust me. Please just trust me for once."

"God! It stinks!"

"Just come here. Please, just look."

"Jesus, Roy! It's horrible!"

"Wait, please just..."

The doctor came to stand over the dead man. He was pulling a woman along by the arm and the dead man saw it was his wife who the doctor thought was leaving him to live with a much younger man who was also a doctor. Her face was crinkled up in disgust as she looked down at the dead man.

He felt she was very sad and unhappy and he dreamed her a life that was happy and not sad, where she loved her doctor husband because he knew everything about the ways things live and die and those were good things to know. He dreamed of growing old and still being happy because of knowing how things grow old and die and having no fear of it. The doctor looked down also and the dead man dreamed him into his dream too, so that he loved his wife who loved him and never worried about younger doctors or his children or his money.

The dead man dreamed this dream for a long time, and when the doctor and his wife finally went away they took something of it with them. They were leaning on each other and crying as they left, but the tears were happy tears.

When they were gone the dead man looked up at the cold light and started to dream of being a star rolling in the sea of the night sky, but it was too difficult and instead he dreamed happily of just the cold hard light. More time went by and he no longer heard the drip of water on the floor.

Later some more people came into the cold room to look at him. He heard the doctor arguing loudly and finally agreeing that it was okay.

He hadn't seen the people before. They were friends of the policeman who had heard stories and wanted to see for themselves. They laughed and giggled until they were looking down at him and then they were quiet as he dreamed their lives. He dreamed a bad painter into a noble starving artist, an ugly lonely man into a philosophical recluse, a bored secretary into a cosmopolitan woman of the world. He dreamed them all happy lives and they left crying in joy. The dead man looked up at the light and dreamed of it. He thought he was still happy.

Later the policeman came back and he dreamed for him again, dreaming him into a staunch defender of justice. After that the farmer came in dragging two young people who were his children that he hadn't seen for two years and the dead man dreamed them all into a happy family. The doctor and his wife returned, looking pale, and he dreamed them in love once more.

More people began to come, friends of friends of friends, and he dreamed for all of them. When there was no one he looked up at the light and tried to dream of that instead, but it was hard.

The doctor eventually gave up all pretense of keeping the morgue private. Everyone in town came to see the dead man. Sometimes they stayed in the cold room for a day or more, not eating or sleeping, just standing and watching and letting the dead man dream their lives into happy shapes.

Finally the dead man had no time to dream of the light at all. People from the town crowded the morgue day and night. They were all beginning to look pale and ill and thin from not eating, but they were happy. The dead man dreamed away bad childhoods and ugliness and sadness and heartbreak and despondency and dreamed happy things in their place. Sometimes the people went away for a while, but they kept coming back, paler and sicker looking than before, but happy. Once in a while there would be nobody around, but then the dead man felt too weary to dream of the light and only rested.

There were ten people in the cold room, then there were twenty. Later on there were ten again, and later still there were five. At last there was only one, the policeman, his police clothes hanging loose and baggy on his thin pallid frame. He coughed violently and then left, but he was still happy.

The cold room was quiet for a long time then.

The dead man stared up at the light. Now that it was quiet and he had rested he thought he could start to dream of it again.

But it was only a bright fluorescent morgue lamp and it hurt his eyes. He closed his eyes to shut out the glare, and realized suddenly that he was alive.

He sat up on the cold table.

His clothes were mudblack, torn, and stank horribly, but his flesh was firm and whole. He was hungry and cold. He had the feeling of having awoken from a very long sleep, and it made him anxious because he felt he had missed something by waking up.

He got up and went out of the morgue. There was no one in the whole hospital. He went out of the hospital into the street of the little town. The trees on the walks had lost their October color and were now skeletons. It made him feel sad.

He walked down the streets of the little town, but there was no one about. All the houses had a silence to them. He knocked at last on some doors, but no one answered.

The man stood on a porch, shivering in his torn muddy clothes. For no reason at all he started crying. He stepped off the porch and set out walking on the road that went out of town. As he left the town, shivering and crying, he had the terrible feeling that he was leaving the happiest place he would ever know.